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PERCEPTION OF DISCRIMINATION AMONG THE STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PADUA:

A FOCUS ON ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS

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Abstract

This study represents the first research on the perception of religious discrimination within a university setting in Italy. It takes a historical approach to the Abrahamic religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - examining their emergence, development and path toward secularization and modernization across centuries to understand the dynamics between religion and discrimination. The field research followed a quantitative and deductive methodology. A self-assisted computer-based survey that included 589 students enrolled at the University of Padua was conducted between May and July 2024, measuring both general and religious discrimination scores alongside the respondents' demographic attributes. Key findings showed no significant difference in general discrimination between students with or without religious beliefs. However, higher levels of religious discrimination were perceived by Muslim students compared to students professing other religions and by students who always wear religious dress or accessories compared to students who despite having a religious belief do not wear such items. General discrimination scores, instead, were higher in foreign nationals compared to Italian citizens, in females compared to males, in students identifying as "Middle Eastern/North African" compared to those identifying as "White/European" and in older students (26-29 years) compared to the younger students (18-21 years). While religious discrimination among the university students in Padua is revealed to appear predominantly in the form of Islamophobia and against individuals wearing religious dress or accessories, general discrimination, especially toward foreign nationals and female students, also urges further tailored research.

Keywords: Discrimination, Religion, University, Student, Survey.

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Title: *Perception of Discrimination Among the Students of the University of Padua: A Focus on Abrahamic Religions*

Introduction and Background

Article 3 of the Italian Constitution states that everyone has equal social dignity and is treated equally under the law, without a distinction on gender, race, language, religion, political opinions and social or personal conditions. Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union brings a more comprehensive and specific approach to discrimination, including discrimination for non-political opinions and sexual orientation. While the studies on gender and sexual orientation-based discrimination are becoming a more relevant discussion topic within the research on discrimination, especially in recent years, this study is aimed at focusing on religious discrimination, which is often underestimated. Its underestimation might be explained by the idea that religions are not as important as they were and are becoming less influential in everyday life. However, after 2001 there has been even a radicalization trend within religious groups in many countries. At the same time, right-wing parties have been promoting religious values in many countries and religion-oriented terrorist attacks have taken place also in countries of the global north. Concerning the effects of 2001 on religious discrimination, the research made by Fox and Akbaba (2015) shows that after 2001 religious discrimination against Muslims followed an increasing trend with compared to the other religions.

The "secularization theory" foresees religions to disappear slowly from societies, while religious symbols, doctrines and institutions will gradually lose their importance. While thinking within the borders of the strict sense of the term, today it is possible to link secularization directly to the separation between the state and the religious bodies. However, the term's foundation is part of a sociological discussion. The term "secularization" was first developed by Max Weber (1930) as a result and part of one of his most well-known ideas, the disenchantment of the world (*Entzauberung*) and further developed by Ernst Troeltsch (1958). For Weber, disenchantment and rationalization were two sides of a medal that formed "secularization" together. The concept of "sacred" was no more a mere mystery. Through a rationalization process, it was disenchanted. Therefore, the religious

bodies were losing credibility. A society that has completed its disenchantment would consist of a society without a religion (Shiner, 1967).

Numerous scholars and thinkers have written about Max Weber's secularization theory since its emergence. To cite among the many, Charles Taylor (2007), while admitting the complexity and the ambiguity of the term secularization, brings an interesting explanation among the others. Taylor describes the transition to secularization as a move away from a society where worshiping God is unquestioned and secure, towards a context where it is just one option among many, and often not the simplest to adopt. He roots his explanation in the term "providential deism" which was a belief system that emerged in the 17th century. It consisted of the belief that God created the world but the world operates according to its natural and rational laws. Taylor points out this as a crucial turning point in the history of Western thought since it was a move away from the belief in a God involved directly in world affairs.

Despite a large group of secularization theorists and their successors, there are also critiques of the secularization theory. As noted by Swatos et al. (1999), a wide group of scholars states that "secularization" has become the "new sacred", which creates a contrast with the theory's starting point.

Norris and Inglehart (2011) note that, while the development of secular approaches is more visible in some societies, more people across the globe remain attached to their traditional religious views "than ever before and they constitute a growing proportion of the world's population". Similarly, Dhima and Golder (2021) state that, even if religious attendance is in decline as expected by the secularization theory, religious beliefs remain present.

Emile Durkheim (1915) states that a modern industrial society needs a religion, as a "system of collective beliefs and practices that have a special authority." He also refers to religion as a body uniting "all who adhere to it into a single moral community." (Durkheim, 1898). Religion described in a Durkheimian manner appears to be a glue that unites people convinced by them by implementing the same moral ideals. The question to be raised in thinking about this definition of religion would be: what if different religions were implementing similar, if not the same, moral ideals over various populations, which later would see each other as

potential enemies attacking their ideals and their God, which within Abrahamic religions, appears to be the real and only God?

The emphasis on their God being the real and the only God is central to all Abrahamic religions. The well-known Jewish prayer Shema Israel (meaning "Hear, O Israel" in Hebrew) starts by stating "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." (Deuteronomy, 6:4). Regarding Christianity, the first letter of Paul the Apostle to Timothy states that "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus," (1 Timothy, 2:5). Finally, Quran states that "And your God is one God. There is no deity [worthy of worship] except Him, the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful." (Quran 2:163). Therefore, the three religions that consist of the object of this study on religious discrimination have notable similarities concerning their perception of God and their judgment of believers to other Gods being idolaters. As noted by Stark (2003), "those who believe there is only One True God are offended by worship directed toward other Gods." This rejection of the legitimacy of other gods by creating a dualism made of a real and false religion was named the "Mosaic Distinction" by Jann Assmann (1996). He argued that this distinction did not exist in polytheistic and tribal religions, as their gods were mainly cosmic and therefore international, thus there has been no need to contest the reality of foreign gods and the legitimacy of different forms of worship.

Since the 1990s, Italy has experienced a continuous flow of immigration, which marked its transformation from an emigrant nation to a destination for immigrants. Consequently, the questions regarding the integration and acceptance of different cultures and traditions have gained importance. As of January 2024, there are 5.307.598 legally resident foreigners in Italy representing 8,5 percent of the entire population. 504.958 are residents in the Veneto Region and 98.069 are residents in Padua province. This number means that 10,2 percent of the residents in Padua are foreign nationals (Istat, 2024). However, as these numbers are only for those registered with the municipal registry offices (*Anagrafe*), the actual number of foreigners might be higher than the numbers above. Additionally, as these numbers are referring also to citizens from EU member states living in Italy, a more precise indicator of cultural diversity can be obtained by considering only individuals with

a residence permit since it is required only for citizens from non-EU countries. As of January 2024, there are 3.727.706 foreign nationals holding residence permits of both short and long-term (Istat, 2024).

Given the high percentages of foreigners residing in Italy, it is crucial to study whether discriminatory acts occur and, if so, to determine the underlying reasons. Studying discrimination in all its kinds is therefore essential for fostering a pleasant and welcoming environment. Although conducting nationwide research may be challenging due to time and resource constraints, city-based studies focusing on a narrow target population such as university students could serve as a valid indicator of the broader situation.

This study aims to capture perceptions of discrimination among students of the University of Padua who are residing in Padua or the Province of Padua. Given the increasing number of international students enrolling at the University of Padua, the city has become an optimal ground for studying discrimination. Therefore, the reason behind observing the level of perception of discrimination is based on the heterogeneity of the student population in Padua concerning religious beliefs and the international students being among the most vulnerable group to discrimination in its various types (Sherry et al., 2009). Their arrival in Italy often consists of a major economic and emotional investment compared to the Italian students. They leave behind their family and friendship ties to develop new ones in a different cultural setting. Furthermore, they must also adapt to a different university setting on both educational and administrative sides. Additionally, they are economically more disadvantaged and more likely to face financial problems (Sherry et al., 2009). By the time most of them arrive in Padua without learning Italian, they are more likely to be set at the margins of daily life engagement. While these conditions are valid for almost any international student, an additional difficulty is set for those having a religious belief identifiable at first sight. One of the main hypotheses of this research is that religious discrimination becomes more evident when the student wears clothing and/or accessories that are linked to a certain type of religion, such as wearing a headscarf for Muslim women and Sikh men.

A self-assisted computer-based survey consisting of two sections was used for this research. The survey had initial questions addressing the respondents' status

regarding Italian citizenship, gender, age, ethnic background, type of studies and the duration of the respondent's stay in Padua. These questions also helped to identify participants ineligible for the research due to not having a relationship with the University of Padua or not residing in Padua or the Province of Padua. Only the participants in compliance with the eligibility criteria were allowed to the following survey sections.

First, the Everyday Discrimination Scale created by Williams et al. (1997) has been used to measure perceived discrimination in its general form. Consequently, the Religious Discrimination Scale developed by Allen et al. (2018) has been used to measure perceived discrimination with a focus on religious discrimination, which was applied only to students with a religious belief of any kind. Following the two sections of the survey, all respondents were asked to answer two additional questions regarding their perception of discrimination after the escalation of the Ukrainian-Russian War in February 2022 and the Israel-Hamas War in October 2023.

It is crucial to note that this research constitutes the first research focusing on religious discrimination among university students in Italy. Similar research was made in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil by interviewing 48 undergraduate students with a qualitative approach (Bastos et al., 2010). A quantitative study focusing on religious discrimination was conducted in Australia by Sharif et al. (2021). However, as they surveyed 4664 students enrolled in 5-9 grades of schools in Australia, their inclusion criteria excluded university students. Another quantitative research on religious discrimination was conducted by Guillermo-Wann and Johnston (2012) by including 4984 students from 12 universities across the United States.

This research embodies the intersection of the researcher's two primary passions and fields of interest: studying Abrahamic religions and conducting social research. It combines the historical and qualitative methodology with a quantitative field research to examine perceptions of general and religious discrimination among students at the University of Padua. The research, grounded in a comprehensive analysis of the origins and development of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, while exploring these religions' paths toward secularization, also illustrates their varied stances regarding gender identity, sexual orientation, attitudes toward other

religions and minorities and justification of religious violence. Despite their shared narratives and scriptures, these religions have also notable differences, which this research accounts for. The historical analysis is followed by quantitative field research that provides comparisons across a wide sample of students of the University of Padua regarding the perceptions of discrimination both in general and in its religious form. This dual methodology highlights the importance of understanding the Abrahamic religions from their origins to the contemporary era to create a well-rounded ground for the quantitative analysis regarding religious discrimination while analyzing also other forms of discrimination which are influential given the intersectional nature of discrimination.

This research is divided into three chapters. The first chapter is titled "Understanding the Other", which includes a historical perspective on the rise and expansion of the Abrahamic religions, the "secularization" processes within the three Abrahamic religions alongside notions of the conflicts between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The second chapter, titled "Combatting the Other", focuses on the relationship between political power and religious power alongside a discussion on religious violence, religiosity as a ground for discriminating against the other and other forms of discrimination. These two theoretical chapters are followed by the third chapter, "Field Research", covering the theoretical framework of the research, research methodology, data analysis, results and a discussion on further research. The third chapter is followed by conclusions and references.

CHAPTER I – UNDERSTANDING THE OTHER

1. Birth of Abrahamic Religions

The term "Abrahamic Religions" is rather recent to indicate three main monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Expressions such as "the religions of the book" or the "monotheistic religions" were commonly used. As the name suggests, the term finds its roots in the Quranic expression "*dīn Ibrāhīm*" (the religion [singular] of Abraham"). The term's recent usage is linked to the inclusion process of Muslim minorities in Western Europe (Stroumsa, 2015).

It is possible to observe Abrahamic religions in their relations and perceptions both between them (as of Judaism-Christianity, Christianity-Islam and Judaism-Islam) and both as a whole, forming a triangular representation. While considering them as a whole, with the emergence of the Abrahamic religions we can observe a shift from polytheism to monotheism, which according to Guy G. Stroumsa (2015) is the major religious transformation of our period. However, it is important to underline that setting rigid boundaries for polytheism and monotheism is difficult. Both polytheism and monotheism include some characteristics of the other. For example, pagan monotheism was a widespread phenomenon in the early stages of Christianity. For many pagan intellectuals under the early Roman Empire and for various religious trends, the idea of a single supreme divine power was a natural one. Similarly, Christianity is often accused by both Jewish and Muslim sects of being polytheistic rather than a monotheistic religion, related to the hierarchy between two divinities, God as the Father and Jesus Christ (Stroumsa, 2015). However, Christianity is not the only religion that objects to this kind of accusation. Since antiquity, several Jewish texts, mostly apocryphal, introduced a dualistic structure by referring to a second divinity situated next to God and beneath Him. Additionally, various rabbinic resources mention that there are "two Powers in heaven" (shtei rashuyot ba-shammayim) (Corbin, 1981).

Even if Christianity and Islam start from the same explanation for the existence of life as described in the Book of Genesis and build their narrations often linking them to the Hebrew Bible, or more accurately, Tanakh (the term composed by the initial letters of Torah, the Nevi'im and the Ketuvim), they developed diversely.

This explains why it is important to study Abrahamic religions by observing their differences without underestimating their similarities.

1.1. Judaism

The influence of Mesopotamian mythology, particularly those of Sumerians and Akkadians, over the Tanakh is particularly evident when comparing the epics from those civilizations with the Holy Scriptures. The establishment of an agriculture-oriented lifestyle and, subsequently, a civilization in Mesopotamia began around 7000 BC. Afterward, Sumerians produced the first cuneiform writing system around 4000 BC. The communities of Mesopotamia had a polytheistic faith where each city had its local gods and goddesses. To cite a few of the ancient deities, in Uruk, Anu was the supreme god of heaven; Inanna was the mother goddess of fertility, love and war; Enlil was the lord of the atmosphere; Enki was the ruler of the fresh waters beneath the earth; Utu was the sun god; Nanna was the moon god (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003).

Around 2300 BC, Akkadian dominated Mesopotamia and their language has become prevalent. Sumerian myths were no longer written in Sumerian cuneiform, but rather in the Akkadian script, which was a Semitic language. The link between Sumerian gods and those Akadians was evident: Anu was equated with El (the chief god); Inanna with Ishtar; and Enki with Ea (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003). Even though the names, shapes and forms of worship differed, the functions of these Mesopotamian deities were similar, especially in the case of cosmic deities. In Mesopotamia, translating divine names was practiced as early as the 3rd millennium (Assmann, 1996).

Sumerian epics contain narratives similar to those found in the creation narratives in the Book of Genesis. According to those narrations, Enlil separated heaven from the earth, and Enki created human beings to grow food for himself and the gods. The Gilgamesh Epic, perhaps the most important and influential work of the Ancient Mesopotamian civilizations, also contains similarities with the Book of Genesis, especially regarding the flood myth (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003). The eleventh tablet of the Epic of Gilgamesh, as translated by M. G. Kovacs (1998), contains passages that bear similarities to the narratives found in the Book of Genesis.

I had all my kith and kin go up into the boat,
all the beasts and animals of the field and the craftsmen I
had go up.
Shamash had set a stated time:
'In the morning I will let loaves of bread shower down,
and in the evening a rain of wheat!
Go inside the boat, seal the entry!'
That stated time had arrived.
In the morning he let loaves of bread shower down,
and in the evening a rain of wheat.
[...]
The... land shattered like a... pot.
All day long the South Wind blew...,
blowing fast, submerging the mountain in water,
overwhelming the people like an attack.
No one could see his fellow,
they could not recognize each other in the torrent.
[...]
Six days and seven nights
came the wind and flood, the storm flattening the land.
When the seventh day arrived, the storm was pounding,
the flood was a war------struggling with itself like a woman
writhing (in labor).
The sea calmed, fell still, the whirlwind (and) flood stopped up.
I looked around all day long------quiet had set in
and all the human beings had turned to clay!
The terrain was as flat as a roof.
[...]
When a seventh day arrived
I sent forth a dove and released it.
The dove went off, but came back to me;
no perch was visible so it circled back to me.
I sent forth a swallow and released it.
The swallow went off, but came back to me;
no perch was visible so it circled back to me.
I sent forth a raven and released it.
The raven went off, and saw the waters slither back.

Even though according to the Book of Genesis the flood lasted for forty days and nights (Genesis 7:12), which is different from the six days and seven nights described by the Gilgamesh Epic, similarities are distinguishable. Major similarities between the two texts include the wind starting to blow after the flood, as mentioned in Genesis 8:1-3, and the release of a dove to find dry land, which is narrated in Genesis 8:8-11.

Not only the narrations of the Tanakh are influenced by the surrounding Mesopotamian culture. Also, the Biblical law (*Halakha*) has borrowed elements from the ancient legal codes, for instance, the relationship between God and Israel is parallel to the relation between a king and his vassals as described in the Assyrian treaties (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003).

While the influence of the narratives from surrounding civilizations on Judaism is evident, Judaism has brought many differences, by simplifying and demythologizing the Mesopotamian myths. Elements such as the birth of gods, their rivalries, sexual relations among them, practices like divination through investigating parts of sacrificed animals and rites to placate ghosts and demons are absent in Judaism (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003).

According to Guy G. Stroumsa (2015), Judaism is a perfect example of an exclusive religion with only limited elements to make space for non-Jews, those categorized as God-fearers. The Tanakh underlines that when Moses received the Torah, it was meant for the people of Israel. The crucial element of Judaism is the people of Israel being the chosen one from God. Torah states it various times, such as in the Book of Deuteronomy “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.” (Deuteronomy 7:6).

Jewish belief has three elements: God, Israel and the Torah. God is perceived as a being outside and above nature. As stated, the people of Israel are believed to have been chosen by God to embody virtue and holiness as an example for the other nations. The Torah is a declaration of Israel's faith and devotion to God and a constitution detailing the rules and laws by which the people of Israel have to live (Kaplan, 1970). According to the Torah, the universe owes its existence to God. God, being the only God, is the essence of the universe and of the Torah and

constitutes the supreme truth for Judaism. This is why Jewish teaching emphasizes the worship of one God (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003).

Alongside the notions of God, Israel and the Torah being central to Judaism, one of the most characteristic elements of Judaism is the destruction of the First and the Second Temples. The understanding of the temple in Judaism differs greatly from the understanding of the temples or worship places of other religions, as the Temple in Judaism is the only place where some specific types of sacrifices could be performed (Sarıkçıoğlu, 2002).

King Solomon began the construction of the First Temple in 964 BC, 480 years after the Jews left Egypt (Besalel, 2001). The construction of the Temple was completed in all its details as designed in 957 BC (Yadin, 1978). The destruction of Solomon's Temple by the Babylonians in 587 BC marked the end of an era in Jewish religion and history (Werblowsky & Wigoder, 1986). Although there was a belief among the Jews that God's Temple would last forever and protect them (Jeremiah 7:4), idolatry, betrayal of God, immorality, failure to observe the Sabbath and the murder of people were cited as the main causes of the destruction of Solomon's Temple (Jeremiah 1:16, 1:17, 5:11, 4:22, 17:20-27, 19:4, 25:23).

After more than half a century of exile in Babylon following the destruction of the First Temple, the Jews returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the Temple. The construction of the Second Temple, which the Jews rebuilt following God's command, took about four years. The Second Temple, which marked the beginning of an era in Jewish history, was completed in 515 BC (Jacobs, 1995).

The Second Temple served more than the first one. However, in 70 AD also the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans (Werblowsky & Wigoder, 1986) causing Jews to live in exile in various parts of the world. The return to the so-called “Promised Lands”, or “The Land of Canaan” would happen only as a result of the Zionist movement initiated by Teodor Herzl in the late 19th century and the consequent foundation of the State of Israel in 1948 (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003).

The destruction of the Second Temple was not influencing only the birth of a new religion, Christianity, appearing as an affirmation of God’s punishment of the Jews who crucified Jesus Christ, it influenced also Judaism, by giving birth to rabbinic Judaism representing a real mutation of the religion of Israel (Grottanelli,

2007). Without a Temple, Judaism had to become a religion with no sacrifices, as the sacrifices were taking place at the Temple (Sarıkçıoğlu, 2002). In the Jewish religion today, the Temple has been replaced by synagogues, the Cohens (priests serving the Temple of Solomon) have been replaced by Jewish religious scholars (rabbis) and Torah study has been replaced by the strict observance of the commandments in the Torah (Haddad, 2020).

1.2. Christianity

Christianity emerged within Judaism and became the most successful and distinct among the various messianic movements. However, its unique structure based on the Trinity and the central figure of Jesus as the Messiah led to significant differences from Judaism. These distinctions became so profound that, thanks in great part to Paul the Apostle (circa 5 - circa 64/65 AD), Christianity evolved into a new religion. The development of its doctrines, rituals, and organizational structures which were different from those of Judaism helped in establishing a Christian identity. As it spread beyond its Jewish roots, thanks to also its missionary movements, Christianity attracted a different population and became a major world faith. While its practices are now greatly different from those of Judaism, as the two religions share the holy scripts from the Old Testament, they still have a lot in common (Jossa, 2007).

Early Christianity, centered around a sacrificial ritual celebrated by priests, represented a more obvious lineage with Judaism than rabbinic Judaism. However, the Christian sacrifice was of a new kind. Its central ritual was called "*anamnēsis*", described as a reactualization of Jesus Christ's sacrifice, who has offered his body as a sacrifice *par excellence* (Stroumsa, 2017).

Since Jesus did not produce any kind of written document, this new religion was founded upon the Gospels written by the Apostles and in this process of the emergence of Christianity, a crucial figure is constituted by that of Paul the Apostle. He was a Jew (more accurately, a Pharisee) from the city of Tarsus in Anatolia. Thus, his Hellenistic heritage made him familiar with elements of pagan culture. Moreover, he was also a Roman citizen, which gave him a different status than other Jews within the imperial rule (Jossa, 2007).

The importance of Paul the Apostle in Early Christianity lies mainly in his letters addressing various populations (the Thessalonians, the Philippians, the Galatians, the Corinthians, the Romans and the Philemon). He is also known as "the Apostle to the Gentiles", which indicated his dedication to addressing the non-Jews in his mission to spread the faith united around Jesus. His activities bore witness to a powerful and original theological thought, that would form the basis for a whole series of discussions in the following centuries, such as the faith, the problem of the sacred texts, the resurrection of the dead, the church as the body of Christ and the spirit as one's own Temple (Jossa, 2007).

Christianity as an established separate religion from Judaism was possible only from the 4th century AD, a period that was marked by the conversion of Emperor Constantine (circa 272 AD -337 AD) in 312 AD. The first three centuries which constituted the origins of the Christian religion faced essentially hostile treatment from the Roman Empire. With the rise of Constantine to the imperial throne, this context is radically changed. The First Council of Nicaea held in 325 AD, with the contributions of Emperor Constantine, was the first ecumenical council. It provided a provisional solution to what had been its most debated doctrinal problem for the first three centuries: the divinity of Jesus and his relationship to the Father (Jossa, 2007).

After Constantine's conversion, even though with a few interruptions like Julian the Apostate, the Roman Empire started to favor the Christian religion. To the extent that in 380 AD Theodosius I established Christianity as the official religion of the Empire (Jossa, 2007).

As Christianity has gained political power within the Empire, a new question regarding the attitude towards the other religions has emerged. Opposed to Jewish exclusiveness which included some space for other "God-fearers", Christian universalism could not easily tolerate non-Christians, which were mainly heretics, pagans, or Jews. Only the last could be tolerated to a certain extent, as Christians and Jews had a total understanding of their religious stands. However, between Christians and others, there was a lack of understanding of the characteristics of the other (Stroumsa, 2017).

Regarding the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, while there was some mutual understanding, it was not necessarily enough to achieve a peaceful coexistence. As there has been direct competition between Jews and Christians, which sometimes led to violence as both groups claimed to be the "real" inheritors of the same cultural and religious heritage, their polemics tend to focus on their conflicting points, rather than their similarities and areas of agreement (Fredriksen & Irshai, 2006).

Christianity, which initially was part of Judaism and became apart from Judaism within its first centuries of existence, immediately after being the accepted religion of the Empire turned the Jews into the first Christian heretics by blaming them for rejecting the correct understanding of their own scriptures. This process was completed in the 6th century with Emperor Justinian, who established the Jews as a community of tolerated heretics (Stroumsa, 2017).

The question regarding understanding the other has become more complex with the emergence of Islam, the third Abrahamic religion. The Christian community living under the rule of the Caliphate had a very similar experience with the Jews under the Roman Empire. The early Muslims applied the same approach to the Christians themselves. Christians would also become a community of tolerated heretics of Islam, who, like the Jews, had consciously altered the one and true message of God, first proclaimed by Abraham and last announced by Mohammad (Stroumsa, 2017).

1.3. Islam

Even though Judaism and Christianity were pillars of a new monotheistic belief system characterized by prophecy and the belief in one true and omnipotent God, these religions did not significantly reach the Arabian Peninsula, as its geological conditions made the area contain mostly sparsely populated and isolated communities. Although five seas surround the Arabian Peninsula, there were no significant harbors except for Aden. The coasts surrounding the peninsula were difficult to access. The peninsula's internal conditions also made the Arabian peninsula geographically unlucky. Despite the vast expanse of land, there are no rivers to facilitate the transport of goods and people through the vast deserts,

steppes, and mountainous regions, except for the Hajar region in the south. Consequently, the geological conditions and climate have significantly shaped the history of the Arabian Peninsula and divided the area into two distinct parts: the rain-fed area of the southwest inhabited by sedentars; and the arid area of the the inner regions inhabited by bedouins. Limited sedentary life was also found in the outskirts of the deserts where oases were situated (Shahid, 1970).

These geographical differences were mirrored also at the linguistic level. Sedentars from the south spoke a Semitic language of their own which has its dialectal variations, and the Arabs of the internal areas and the oases of its outskirts, whose language is Arabic, another Semitic language, with its various dialects (Shahid, 1970).

During the first centuries AD, the Arabian Peninsula was mostly characterized by a polytheistic belief system similar to that of the Mesopotamians, where offerings were made to idols. This period is known as *Jāhiliyya*, or the period of "ignorance", referring to the pre-Islamic period in Arabian history (Caner, 2006). Christianity and, to a lesser degree, Judaism were spreading among Arabs only starting from the 3rd century (Watt, 1970).

It was around 570 AD when the Islamic prophet Muhammad ibn Abdullah ibn Abd al-Muttalib ibn Hashim was born as a member of the Qurayshi tribe in Mecca. He became an orphan when he was six years old. He was raised first by his paternal grandfather and then by his uncle, Abu Talib. He stayed with his uncle until he married his first wife, Khadija bint Khuwaylid, when he was 25 years old (Filoramo, 1999).

In his early 40s, during a period of spiritual reflexivity in a cave of Mount Hira, on an unspecified day in the month of Ramadan, Muhammad had his first theopathic experience receiving the first wordings of the Quran (Filoramo, 1999). The Angel Gabriel (*Jibraeil*), asked Mohammad to listen and recite what is unanimously considered the first Quranic revelation: "Recite in the name of your Lord who created - created man from a clinging substance. Recite, and your Lord is the most Generous - Who taught by the pen - Taught man that which he knew not." (Quran 96:1-5).

The experience of revelation was not easy to perceive, as he initially thought he was losing his mind (Filoramo, 1999). Consequently, he received another revelation which underlined that his hearings were the real words of God, which later became the surah Al-Qalam: "By the pen and what they inscribe, you are not, [O Muhammad], by the favor of your Lord, a madman. And indeed, for you is a reward uninterrupted. And indeed, you are of a great moral character." (Quran 68:1-4).

For the first three years, the first revelations were hidden within his immediate family members and people closely connected to him, who were also the first Muslims. Later Muhammad started to preach publicly after he had around seventy revelations. As he was preaching, his followers started to memorize and recite the Quran alongside him. As the etymology of the word suggests, the name Quran is derived from the Semitic verbal root "*q-r-*", which means "to recite, to read". However, the Meccan elite soon realized their domination within the society might see the negative consequences of the preachings of Mohammad. Hearing their gods being denied, made the Meccan elites' approach soon move from curiosity to hostility. As it was becoming more and more difficult to live in Mecca for Muslims, Mohammad and his first followers decided to move to Medina in 622, the journey that is known as the *Hijrah*. With their arrival to Medina, the first Muslim settlements began. The newly established community was no longer just a community of faith but also a political community (Filoramo, 1999). Muhammad continued to receive revelations until he died in 632. In his last years, the revelations tended to be longer and they mainly dealt with the affairs of the community of Muslims at Medina (Watt, 1970).

While Islam was announcing that for them the last prophet, Mohammad, had arrived and sealed the age of prophecy, for Jews the Messiah was yet to come. While for Christians, the Messiah was to return and establish his kingdom over the earth (Stroumsa, 2017). The emergence of Islam has given rise to centuries-long anti-Muslim polemics within Christianity. There has always been the accusation of false prophecy towards Mohammad. For both Christians and, to some extent, Jews, Mohammad succeeded in appearing as a prophet while being an impostor (Colpe, 1990).

With the Sasanian conquest of Jerusalem in 614 and then the Muslims reaching the city in 636, both Jews and Christians in Palestine felt they were living in apocalyptic times. The apocalyptic trends of early Christianity, which nearly disappeared after the conversion of Emperor Constantine, were back. The Christian world was centralized by the expectations of the end of times (Stroumsa, 2017).

2. Secularizing the Religions

The generally accepted meaning of the term secularization is the separation between the state and the religion. However, this separation occurred differently across populations (Swatos et al., 1999). Regarding this variety, the European and American ways towards a secular state give a valuable example. According to Ralf Dahrendorf (1959), European societies were characterized by an intrinsic knit system of different institutions: church, state, education, health, welfare and law. Each was dependent on the other. Therefore, rendering one independent from the others was a more complex process than it was for the United States, where the church and state were constitutionally separated from the earliest times, as stated in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights.

Swatos et al., (1999) underline two important observations in studying the secularization theory. Firstly, since secularization has been also used to indicate different concepts, addressing a uniform meaning of the term is difficult. Its meaning is relative to the meaning of the religion, which is difficult to define as well. Secondly, the entire theory of secularization is founded on a historical analysis of what it meant to be religious in the past. However, assessing the true meaning of the level of religiousness in the past is a rather difficult one, since it lacks the possibility of testing. Only historical and anthropological approaches are to be used in comparing today's religiosity to that of the past. Carlo Ginzburg (2023) gives a different point of view regarding the secularization theory by stating that even though secularization is frequently associated with a rejection or a distancing from the sacred, it is possible to observe that it also assimilates and reshapes the sacred. According to him, by observing this function of secularization the complexity of the term becomes more apparent.

A case study conducted in the small city of Muncie, Indiana named *Middletown Studies* gave important insights into the everyday life of the white American society living in a typical small city in the United States right before the Great Depression (Lynd & Lynd, 1929). It measured, among the other important aspects of the daily life, the level of religious attendance among the inhabitants of the city. In the 1970s, a re-study of the Middletown was funded by the National Science Foundation and the results were not in favor of the secularization theorists that are expecting the religion, or for some at least the religious attendance, to vanish slowly from the societies. 67% of the total trend lines regarding religion showed a greater religiosity among the inhabitants between the 1920s and 1970s (Caplow, 1982; Caplow et al., 1983). The national survey data across the United States from the 1940s shows a similar trend (Swatos et al., 1999). The research made by R. Finke and R. Stark (1992) also falsifies the secularization theory.

Regarding the situation in Italy, Biolcati et al. (2020) used the Church Attendance and Religious Change Pooled European dataset (CARPE) and observed a decrease in church attendance in Italy at different paces from 1968 to 2010. However, as Jeffrey K. Hadden (1987) stated, church attendance is not the only evidence in assessing a decline in religiosity, as religion could be manifested also without going to the mass every week.

According to Hadden (1987), secularization theory is rather a doctrine than a theory, as its foundations rest on assumptions that have not been critically analyzed, largely because they are seen as an unquestioned ideology instead of a coherent, interconnected set of propositions. In addition, Hadden (1987) further states that "secularization was more than taken-for-granted; the idea of secularization became sacralized."

To understand the reasons behind this sacralization process we need to examine the process that led to modernization and, consequently, the secularization of the religious institutions, within a conflict between the science and the clergy in Europe. The first conflict was the emerging evolutionary ideas that culminated with Charles Darwin. The second major point of conflict revolved around status and power struggles, as following the Counter-Reformation and the rise of national monarchies, the clergy traded their monopoly for legitimacy. While the church was

losing a significant amount of power, it maintained substantial autonomy. A third source of conflict arose when science began to challenge religion's exclusive claim to understand the way of working of the human mind and consciousness. As science was dismantling the superstition and ignorance that supported the religious authorities, anti-clericalism was becoming widespread (Hadden, 1987).

This brief introduction to the Age of Faith's conflict with the Age of Reason is useful in describing what was the starting point of the European process of secularization. Since this study aims to focus on Abrahamic religions, it would be appropriate to go into detail by starting with the first Abrahamic religion, Judaism, and its own Enlightenment, *Haskalah*. The secularization processes for Christianity and Islam will be illustrated within the following passages.

2.1. From *Haskalah* to Reform and Conservative Judaism

Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, is rooted in the 17th and 18th centuries Holland. The greatest of Dutch-Jewish thinkers, Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* written in 1670 rejected the Maimonidean belief that the Holy Scriptures contained a hidden esoteric meaning and argued that they were intended for the masses. He opposed the idea that the Jews were "chosen people", which for him had no metaphysical or moral significance. In addition, Spinoza stated that the Torah was not composed entirely by Moses. Even though he was not the first thinker to come out with this idea, he was perhaps the bravest one to deepen his idea that the Torah was not an artifact of Moses and was a man-made book (Nadler, 2001).

Spinoza's ideas were the basis of those of Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), who is considered to be the father of the Haskalah by many. However, as Shmuel Feiner (2010) argues in his book dedicated to the personality of Moses Mendelssohn, it would be wrong to call Mendelssohn the father of the Haskalah, despite his great contributions to the thinkers of the Jewish Enlightenment. According to Feiner, Mendelssohn rather played a marginal role in the establishment of the Haskalah movement's institutions, its organization and the dissemination of its ideas.

Mendelssohn, mainly influenced by the nascent German Enlightenment (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010), wrote various studies where he argued for the existence of God and creation. He stated that human reasoning is capable of discovering the existence of God, divine providence and the immortality of the soul. He thought that anyone has the rational capability to achieve the truth of natural religion (Feiner, 2004b). For Mendelssohn, what made Judaism different from the other religions is its revealed law (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003).

Mendelssohn translated the Torah into German alongside a commentary (called *Bi'ur*, meaning "explanation, exegesis"), to make Jews able to read and understand it. The translation was written in Hebrew letters (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010). His comments on the Torah combined Judaism with secular thought of the 18th century. In his defense of Judaism, *Jerusalem*, written in 1783 he argued that neither the Church nor the state should use coercion, as none of them has the right to impose its religious views. His ideas were inherited by several Jewish thinkers from Prussia known as *Maskilim* (Feiner, 2010).

Maskilim were a core group, as the number of intellectuals had never exceeded 200 in Prussia. They were characterized by a two-layer culture. On one side they were a part of the Torah-oriented culture acquired through traditional education. On the other side, they were a part of the Enlightenment, acquired by studying the texts produced by European thinkers (Feiner, 2004a). The Maskilim were involved in literature and education, as they also established Jewish schools and produced the first Jewish literary magazine, The Gatherer (*Ha-Meassef*), in 1783 (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003; Baskin & Seeskin, 2010). However, it would be incorrect to define Maskilim only as a religious group with uncommon ideals or as a mere group composed of literary élites, as by the end of the 18th century the movement was also involved in political affairs (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010). They were able to spread their ideals through intellectual gatherings held within their societies, where they read and discussed literary works. They were set apart from the general Jewish community, which had a hostile approach to the Haskalah. They regarded themselves as an avant-garde Jewish society (Feiner, 2004a).

The first centers of the movement were Konigsberg, Breslau and Berlin, which were under the Kingdom of Prussia (Feiner, 2004a). By the 1820s, the center of the

movement moved to the Austrian Empire, later in the 1840s the new center for Maskilim was Russia. Also in these new centers, Maskilim thinkers mostly lived isolated as they were not embraced by the Jewish populations in Austria and Russia due to their criticism of rabbinic Judaism (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003). Another important location for the Maskilim movement was Galicia, where there was a Maskilim population closely allied to the Austrian Haskalah (Feiner, 2004a).

A shift of the major emphasis from religious history to the people characterized the Enlightenment's historical thinking and writing. Voltaire's book *The Age of Louis XIV* begins with these words: "It is not merely the life of Louis XIV that we propose to write; we have a wider aim in view. We shall endeavour to depict for posterity, not the actions of a single man, but the spirit of men in the most enlightened age the world has ever seen." Concerning history writing, Shmuel Feiner (2004a) states that the Maskilim are often accused of being ahistorical or anti-historical. However, after examining a range of sources from the 18th and 19th centuries, he found out that they demonstrated a great interest in history. Within Jewish history writing, he underlines the importance of the Maskilic history's shift from traditional Jewish history writing, as their writings offered an alternative Jewish history.

At the beginning of the 19th century, Israel Jacobson (1768-1828), a Jewish financier and communal leader, initiated a reform program by founding a school for boys in Seesen, in Lower Saxony, which opened in 1801. This new kind of school was characterized by a particularity that was not present in other Jewish schools; general subjects were taught by Christian teachers while a Jewish instructor gave lessons about Judaism (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003). The most notable contribution of Jacobson to Jewish history was building the first Reform synagogue in 1810 in Seesen, which made him the father of the Jewish Reform movement. The Seesen Temple had an organ and its services included not only instrumental music but also prayers and sermons in German (Arkush, 1994). Successively, the opening of a Reform Temple in Hamburg in 1818 was also a crucial moment for Reform Judaism, as its services contained several innovations to prayers and sermons in German accompanied by choral singing and organ music which helped in spreading these innovations to other areas (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003).

Two important characteristics of the Reform Synagogue compared to the others are the positioning of the reader's cathedra (*Bimah*) in front of the Holy Arch (*Aron HaKodesh*) and the men and women worshipping together at the synagogue without separation, a feature that was first introduced by the American Reform Synagogues and then spread to the other Reform Synagogues (Arkush, 1994).

As a response to the Reformist movement, several Orthodox Jews had hostile attributes, as for them not preserving the tradition was a violation of the Jewish heritage. The movement later became the so-called Neo-Orthodox movement. The most prominent of these scholars was Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) who published *The Nineteen Letters on Judaism* in 1836, as a defense of Orthodoxy (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010). He argued the term "Orthodox Judaism" by stating that:

> *It was not the 'Orthodox' Jews who introduced the word 'orthodoxy' into Jewish discussion. It was the modern 'progressive' Jews who first applied this name to 'old', 'backward' Jews as a derogatory term. This name was at first resented by 'old' Jews. And rightly so. 'Orthodox' Judaism does not know any varieties of Judaism. It conceives Judaism as one and indivisible.*

In 1842, the Jewish Reform movement gained pace by founding the Society of the Friends of Reform in Frankfurt. Within the first decades of the 19th century, the reform movement spread also to other countries but in Frankfurt, it reached its most radical form. During a conference held in Frankfurt in 1842, it was even recommended that the aspirations for a future return to the Land of Israel and the restoration of the Jewish State be omitted from the prayerbook (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003). With this desire to eliminate the idea of re-establishing the Temple of Jerusalem, the Reformists called and still call their synagogues "temples", which is a characteristic of the Reform synagogue (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010). In another synod held in 1846 in Breslau, the Sabbath observance was put into discussion and the second-day observance of festivals for the Jews in the diaspora was eliminated (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003).

Even though the Reform movement was born in central Europe, it had its most success in North America. Before the arrival of Reformist Jews, the first Jewish colonies in North America were composed of Sephardic Orthodox Jews. The Jewish Reform movement appeared in the United States in 1824 in South Carolina and

grew quickly after a German-Jewish immigration floss in the 1820s and 1830s (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010). By 1842 there were three German congregations in New York City (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003). By the 1880s, the Reform movement was the dominant one in North America (Zola, 2002).

Within the same period, also another non-Orthodox branch of Judaism, Conservative Judaism, was born in Central Europe and afterward started to develop in the United States. However, it would be fully institutionalized only at the beginning of the 20th century (Scult, 1999). The event that marked this shift occurred when Zacharias Frankel (1801-1875) split from other Reformists by walking out of the Frankfurt Rabbinical Conference of 1845 following the statement of a group of Reform rabbis about the use of Hebrew which according to them was no longer necessary in worship (Sarna, 2004). This event symbolized his break from the Reform movement. He successively became the head of the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau in 1854 (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010).

Consequently, in 1902, wealthy community leaders agreed to bring Solomon Schechter (1847-1915), then Talmudic lecturer at Cambridge University in England, to lead the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York City, which was established in 1886, and to promote Conservative Judaism in North America. Schechter is well known for using the term "Catholic Israel" to refer to the group of dedicated Jews who wanted to fully understand and immerse into Judaism by living by its laws, *Halakha* (Scult, 1999). He tried to find a common ground between Reform and Orthodox Judaism and preferred to highlight the significance of traditional rituals, customs, observances and beliefs, while also emphasizing the importance of a historical memory of Jews (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003).

By the 19th century both Reformist and Conservative Judaism had become an unstoppable phenomenon and the new center for their development was the United States (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003; Baskin & Seeskin, 2010). Both contributed significantly to the modernization process of Judaism. To deepen, Reformist Judaism was the first to begin ordaining women, with the initiative of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1972. Various reforms to update the liturgy were in process within the Reformist sects from the 1970s, which were concluded in 1975 by the introduction of the *Gates of Prayer: The New Union*

Prayer Book. With this new liturgy, the services varied in wording, their theological emphasis and additional Hebrew text alongside the traditional components was added. In 1994, a gender-sensitive edition of the book was released, followed by a completely new prayer book, *Mishkan T'filah*, in 2007, which reinstated many traditional elements that had been removed from the prayer book released in 1975 (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010). Interfaith couples, where only one part is Jewish, were tolerated since 1978 (Kaplan, 1983). In 1990, homosexual students were accepted into the Reformist rabbinic studies. In 2002, the officiation of same-sex marriages was in the act by numerous Reformist rabbis (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010).

Within Conservative Judaism, these reforms were introduced relatively late. The possibility to ordinate women was introduced in 1983 and the first woman rabbi was ordained in 1985. Within the same year, a new prayer book, *Sim Shalom*, was introduced. The new book attempted to articulate the movement's distinctive liturgical and theological approach. A revised edition of the book was published in 1998 and included the names of the matriarchs whenever the patriarchs of the Jewish people are invoked. Further, the book referred to God in gender-neutral terms such as "Sovereign" and "Guardian," rather than "Lord" or "King." (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010). The gender-equal approach of Conservative Judaism later included also the acceptance of LGBTQIA+ as rabbinical students. While the acceptance of different sexual identifications and orientations occurred earlier in Reformist Judaism, Conservative Judaism had a steady but gradual approach. Additionally, the officiation of same-sex marriages is accepted by many Conservative rabbis. These developments have prompted some to question the necessity of Conservative Judaism, as its policies increasingly resemble those of Reform Judaism (Wertheimer, 2000).

The third of the four main denominations within Judaism is Reconstructionist Judaism. It is the only major movement to be fully developed in the United States. The movement's founder was Mordecai M. Kaplan (1881-1983), who embraced the philosophy of a comprehensive view of Jewish civilization, advocating for a rationalistic interpretation that went beyond a narrow religious framework. He conceptualized Judaism as an evolving religious civilization rather than merely a faith tradition. Kaplan notably opposed the notion of the "chosen people" for its

exclusionary implications and dismissed both messianism and traditional eschatological beliefs. His initial aim for Reconstructionism was to create a foundation that could foster Jewish unity by transcending internal divisions, unifying Jews in their collective identity and continuity (Kaplan, 1994).

Over time, Reconstructionist Judaism has increasingly integrated elements of spirituality into its practice and liturgy. The movement promotes the use of non-gendered language when referring to God, often using terms such as “Source of Life.” Recent prayer books reflect this shift, featuring gender-neutral English translations. Editors of these texts have sought to strike a balance between enhancing spiritual expression and maintaining fidelity to Kaplan's original principles, though achieving this balance has proven challenging at times (Alpert & Staub, 2000).

The last and most observant of the four main denominations of Judaism is Orthodox Judaism, which is recently articulated as modern-Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox, even if the members of these two groups prefer to not use these names to identify themselves. In contrast to Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Judaisms, Orthodoxy is not unified under a single set of institutions. The only exception is of modern-Orthodoxy in the United States which is represented by the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (Mittleman, 1996).

After experiencing a decline for the past two centuries, the Orthodox movement has seen a remarkable and largely unexpected resurgence since 1967 in both the United States and Israel. This recovery was significantly influenced by the rise of the numbers of young Jews from non-Orthodox backgrounds who began embracing more traditional forms of Jewish life and worship during the late 1960s and early 1970s. A key factor in this renewed enthusiasm was the surprising victory of the State of Israel in the Six-Day War, in June 1967 (Liebman & Cohen, 1990; Susser & Liebman, 1999).

The modern-Orthodox community has responded to the global wave of modernization in various ways and engaged with them to some extent. To cite one of these engagements with modernity, several modern-Orthodox institutions offer advanced Talmudic studies also to women, providing them with the opportunity to attain a high level of proficiency across the full range of rabbinic texts. In contrast,

the ultra-Orthodox have sought to resist and minimize the influence of modernity, striving to exclude it as much as possible from their practices and worldview. Despite some ultra-Orthodox rabbis tolerating approach to technology, the limited role of women within the ultra-Orthodox community and the lack of any minimal sign of inclusion towards people identifying themselves differently is still a concerning matter in discussing the modernization process within Judaism (Baskin & Seeskin, 2010).

2.2. Protestant Reformation, Counter-Reformation and Inclusiveness in Christianity

To illustrate better how the Protestant Reformation took place in Europe, it would be necessary to understand the economic, cultural and urban conditions that characterized the continent in the 15th and 16th centuries. Carlos M. N. Eire (2016), professor of History and Religious Studies, underlines that all great fathers of the Protestant Reform were born between 1480 and 1500. Therefore, it was crucial for him to understand the conditions of the time and what brought such a division within the Catholic Church.

Commercial ties with Asia were in expansion over the past century. The search for new naval routes to facilitate trade between Europe and the Far East opened a new era in world history by bringing the most important novelty of the time, the discovery of the Americas in 1492. The domination and exploitation of the New World fundamentally changed Europe's economy, politics, society and culture. It reshaped trade routes and shifted the balance of power among European countries. Religion was also entering a phase of reflection, as the first conquerors of the New World were facing different rituals and beliefs. While aiming to Christianize the indigenous population, they started to question also their faith (Eire, 2016).

Another important characteristic of the period that shaped the childhood of the greatest leaders of the Protestant Reform was the invention and spreading of the printing press. In 1455 the first printed book in Western History, a Bible copy, was produced in Mainz. Printing houses expanded rapidly across Western Europe during the late 15th century and experienced significant advances after 1500. Italy, Germany and France were at the forefront of this development. However, the

European population was still composed of the majority of illiterates. While it is difficult to address it with certainty, a general estimate suggests the literacy rate was between 10-15 percent of the total population in Europe. Illiteracy was also linked to the fact that despite the commercial revolution of the Late Middle Ages and the expansion of trade routes after discoveries, Europe was still a continent based on agriculture (Eire, 2016).

Another important element characterizing the pre-Reform period was the feudal system. Medieval European society was organized into a hierarchical structure where land ownership determined power and status. The Catholic Church, having become the largest landholder in Europe by owning no less than half the territory of France and Germany, wielded immense influence within the feudal system. Therefore, the Church not only served as a spiritual authority but also played a role as a great political and economic force (Bainton, 1963). To cite only an example of the Catholic Church's deviation from the ideals of the Bible, during this period the sale of church offices (called "simony") became a common practice even though it was forbidden *de jure* (Eire, 2016).

The intersection of these various novelties and crises shaped the period right before the emergence of one of the most transformative periods in the history of Christianity, the Protestant Reformation. It is important to underline that the Reform was not a mere protest made by single rebellions, it was rather a fruit of growing dissatisfaction within the Catholic Church that found the perfect ground for its explosion in 1517 in Wittenberg (Bainton, 1963; Eire, 2016).

Martin Luther (1483-1546), a German monk and professor of theology, was deeply concerned about the Church's exploitation of indulgences, that he spoke critically of them three times during the sermons in 1516, the last one being on All Hallows' Eve. He argued that if the pope could deliver souls from purgatory, he would be cruel not to release them all. Furthermore, if he has this ability, he can do more for the dead than for what he can for the living (Bainton, 1950). His critiques, however, had to wait an entire year to meet a greater public.

In 1517, he began to intrastate the corrupting of the Church by rebelling against Johann Tetzel (circa 1465-1519), a German Dominican friar assigned to distribute indulgences throughout Germany. Tetzel was working on behalf of Albert of

Brandenburg (1490-1545), who, despite his young age to become a bishop, held already the sees of Halberstadt and Magdeburg and aspired to the archbishopric of Mainz, thanks to his money lending to the then Pope Leo X, a Medici, to construct the St. Peter's Basilica (Bainton, 1950; Biasiori, 2015). The final straw for Luther was these words attributed to Tetzel while selling indulgences: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." (Bainton, 1950).

Martin Luther posted his ninety-five theses at the door of the Castle Church on All Hallows' Eve, 31 October 1517, (Bainton, 1950) the day celebrated as *Reformationstag* in Germany today (Biasiori, 2015). His idea was not to publish his critiques and condemns against the Church's activities with a wide public, he rather aimed to initiate a scholarly discussion. This is confirmed also by the fact that he wrote his thesis in Latin, the language of science and the clergy, and not in German, the common language. However, others, without acknowledging him, translated the theses into German and gave them to the press. Soon after, his theses were famous all across Europe and reached also the Pope (Bainton, 1950).

Luther based his ideas on salvation mainly on his interpretation of Paul the Apostle's theology in the New Testament. He opposed the idea that salvation could be bought or earned through human actions, such as purchasing indulgences. It was rather a gift given by God to those who had faith in him. This belief formed the foundation of what would become one of the key tenets of Protestant theology: *sola fide* (faith alone). If one was saved only for his faith, then one was saved only by grace alone, *sola gratia*, which was another tenet Luther and his followers had in their hearts and minds (Eire, 2016).

Finally, at the real center of the conflict between Luther and the Catholic Church there was the issue of *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), the belief that the Bible, rather than Church tradition or the Pope, was the ultimate authority in matters of faith. It led Luther to scrutinize all of his theology according to his interpretation of the Bible. *Sola Scriptura*, *sola gratia* and *sola fide* then became the main pillars of the Protestant Churches (Eire, 2016).

According to R. H. Bainton (1963), even though the Reform movement is commonly seen as a result of a combination of the Renaissance, the nationalist ideas' damaging the Holy Roman Empire and the papal theocracy and the emerging

capitalism, for him the Reformation was a movement apart from these events. They were not the cause of the Reformation, they only conditioned its course. The Reformation, described by Bainton, was a religious reawakening that might be regarded as the renewer of Christendom.

Luther's actions quickly escalated into a large theological dispute. The Catholic Church, rather than engaging with Luther's concerns, viewed his theses as a threat to its authority. In 1520, Pope Leo X issued a papal bull, known by its opening words *Exsurge Domine* (meaning "arise o Lord"), condemning Luther's teachings and ordering him to recant within sixty days, which resulted in Luther's excommunication from the Catholic Church (Bainton, 1950; Eire, 2016).

A crucial moment regarding the emergence of a new form of Christianity was the culmination of Luther's cult as a religious leader at the Diet of Worms in 1521. To the request to recant his writings, he refused by stating his famous words, "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen." (Bainton, 1950; Eire, 2016).

Following his refusal to recant, the Edict of Worms was issued. It declared Luther as an outlaw and heretic, banned all his writings and forbade anyone to protect him. A crucial figure, Frederick

the Wise (1463-1525), Elector of Saxony, chose to not obey the statements of the edict and managed to hide him as if he was kidnapped. Luther started hiding at Wartburg Castle but the movement he created was still in action as his writings continued to circle (Eire, 2016).

During this period of hiding as an outlaw that went from April 1521 to March 1522, Luther began his translation of the New Testament into German, a project that he perhaps was projecting as early as 1517 since he pointed out some mistranslations in the biblical text from the Latin Vulgate within his theses. It took only three months for him to complete his noblest achievement. His translation was so impressive that he is said to have claimed "I endeavored to make Moses so German that no one would suspect he was a Jew." (Bainton, 1950).

While Martin Luther's central figure as the father of the Reformation is not deniable, he was not the only figure to lead the charge against the Catholic Church. In 1519, Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531) initiated the Reformation in German Switzerland. He shared much of Luther's ideas, such as *sola fide, sola Scriptura,*

sola gratia and exploitation of indulgences. Like Luther, he argued the veneration of images, fasting during Lent and the celibacy of the clergy had no ground in the Bible. He shared the belief that a reduction and revision of the sacraments was necessary, as well as in the simplification of the liturgy in the vernacular. However, there were also differences between the two. Zwingli was more inclined towards humanism and he was a disciple of Erasmus (Bainton, 1963). He even insisted that he followed the path of Erasmus, not that of Luther (Eire, 2016). Zwingli's Swiss patriotism was also another difference (Bainton, 1963).

In 1519, Zwingli announced that he would no longer limit himself to the biblical readings assigned for each Sunday of the year. Instead, he began preaching through the entire Gospel of Matthew, using the Greek text as his reference on the pulpit. In many Swiss cities, among which also Zurich, the protests began with the consumption of meat during Lent. Even though Zwingli himself did not consume meat during the fast, he supported those who did. It would not be wrong to state that the Swiss Reformation took a more radical and pure stance than that of Germany, as after three disputations, it resulted in the abolition of the mass in Zurich, the burial of the relics of the saints, the removal of images, the removal of the organ in the cathedral, permission to eat meat in Lent, freeing of priests from the celibacy rule, of which the great fathers of the Protestant Reformation availed themselves. Zwingli's dedication to the Reformation was so intense that he died in 1531 while battling for it during the civil war (Bainton, 1963; Eire, 2016).

Another great leader of the Reformation in Europe was John Calvin (1509-1564). He was only eight years old when Luther's theses became public. Despite being French by birth, Calvin fled to Geneva after converting to Protestantism. There he systematized his understanding of Reformed theology and became the leader of the protestant reformation in the independent city-state of Geneva. He shared many points with Luther but also had different opinions: while basing his ideology still on three pillars of Protestantism, namely *sola fide*, *sola gratia* and *sola Scriptura*, Calvin was also convinced by the concepts of election and predestination. Election and predestination refer to the idea that God had already chosen who would be saved and who would not. Even though this concept might seem like a negative one at first impact, Calvin's perception of it was highly

positive. He emphasized that any event, no matter how minor or negative, was directly controlled by the will of God. This perspective provided him and his followers with the reassurance that even unpleasant experiences were part of God's will and therefore they were inherently good. This conviction instilled great determination in Calvinists. Additionally, for Calvin these pillars of Protestantism became four instead of three, by adding *soli Deo gloria*, meaning "to God alone be the glory." (Eire, 2016).

Calvin's greatest masterpiece, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, was revised four times from 1536 until it reached its final version in 1559 in Latin. The first edition was published in Latin, subsequent editions appeared in both French and Latin. It was translated into English in 1561 (Ricca, 2007). English translation of the book contributed greatly to its success (Eire, 2016) and the book served a large section of the Protestant world for centuries (Bainton, 1963).

Thanks to Calvin's works, Geneva became a model of a reformed Christian city and a center for the establishment and spread of Protestantism (Ricca, 2007). However, Calvin's influence was not only limited to Geneva; it soon spread to France, where it gave rise to the Huguenot movement, the name given to French Calvinists of which exact origin remains unknown (Bainton, 1963). Subsequently, Scotland also became predominantly Protestant, largely thanks to John Knox's (circa 1514-1572) establishment of the Presbyterian Church (Bainton, 1963; Ricca, 2007).

Among the other branches of Reformations, it is worth mentioning Anabaptism, which believed that adult baptisms were necessary to make a conscious decision to become Christian, (Bainton, 1963; Eire, 2016), Anglicanism, which emerged more from a political stance than a religious one, following Pope Clement VII's refusal to annul the marriage of King Henry VIII to Catherine of Aragon and, finally, Puritanism, emerged in England by those who were not fully satisfied by the reforms of Anglicans and intended to "purify" the religion (Eire, 2016).

The Protestant Reformation started by Martin Luther, alongside all the varieties of Protestant Churches that came into existence, went so far beyond the lands where it emerged by taking possession of a great portion of Europe and an extensive

following in the United States through later waves of European immigration (Bainton, 1950).

As described by Paolo Ricca (2007), the Reformation aims to revitalize the church through biblically literate people. The original intent was not to modify the church, but rather to re-evangelize it. This process involved revitalizing the faith and enforcing the quality of its spiritual existence by reestablishing a connection with Christ, his teachings, the Holy Spirit and the biblical narrative. Therefore, it marked a renewal of biblical Christianity. It was a fundamental milestone as for the first time since the early apostolic period, a church that operates without the hierarchical structures of bishops or a pope emerged in Europe. Ricca (2007) highlights some key points of the Protestant Reformation; firstly, the Reformation made space for variety as new Churches were founded on a great solid theological basis but diverged significantly and secondly, the Reformation was a political movement, concerning the entire *polis* in all aspects of its life, not just the religious one.

The Catholic Church took action only too late to avoid the division within Western Christianity and embarked on its internal reform process through the Council of Trent (1545-1563) initiated by Pope Paul III (1468-1549) (Ricca, 2007). This Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation, named Counter-Reformation or Catholic Reformation, represented a crucial moment in European history.

The first significant decree from the Council was issued in 1546, concerning the issue of authority. However, the Catholic stance was still far away from Luther's and his successors' *sola Scriptura* principle. The decree affirmed that divine truth is contained in both Scripture and tradition. Therefore, the Church's right to interpret divine revelation was reconfirmed. Additionally, the Council rejected also the *sola fide* principle by reaffirming the importance of both good works and faith for salvation (MacCulloch, 2005).

The council had met in twenty-five sessions over three separate periods throughout eighteen years; the first period lasted from 1545 to 1547 and was convened under Pope Paul III. The second was from 1551 to 1552 and was convened under Pope Julius III (1487-1555). The third and last period was held from 1562 to 1563 and convened under Pope Pius IV (1499-1565) (MacCulloch,

2005; Eire, 2016). Throughout its sessions, the Council provided doctrinal clarifications alongside comprehensive reforms aimed at resolving the Church's moral and administrative deficiencies. Pope Pius V, the successor of Pope Pius IV, also continued to introduce the reforms initiated by the Council (Janelle, 1949).

The first Index of Prohibited Books was compiled in 1557 under Pope Paul IV (1476-1559). Pope Pius V compiled a new and slightly laxer version Index of Prohibited Books in 1564, known as the Tridentine Index (Janelle, 1949; Eire, 2016). Among the notable reforms arising from the Council, was the prohibition of selling indulgences and the uniformization of Catholic liturgy. The Missal and the Breviary were reformed and the Roman Catechism was published in 1566 under Pope Pius V. Soon after, it was translated into Italian, German, French, Polish and Spanish to ensure uniformity in Catholic teaching and practice across Europe (Janelle, 1949). Regarding the sacraments, the Council agreed that there were seven sacraments, not only baptism and communion, as Protestants believed (Eire, 2016).

Therefore, the Tridentine reforms were designed to strengthen the Church's authority and introduce a more disciplined ecclesiastical hierarchy and a clearer liturgy. In addressing the arguments raised by the Protestants, the Council reaffirmed the essential doctrines of Catholicism and condemned the teachings of Protestant reformers. The decisions taken at the Council were a mere defense of Catholic theology while initiating several internal reforms.

One of the most effective tools for implementing and promoting the reforms introduced by the Council of Trent was the Society of Jesus, known as Jesuits. It was founded by Íñigo López de Loyola (1491-1556), commonly known as Ignatius of Loyola, in 1534 and received the approval of Pope Paul III in 1540. Jesuits set up their headquarters in Rome and elected Ignatius as their superior general for life. Even though the order began with just a few men, they rapidly grew in number. It had about a thousand members by the time of Ignatius' death in 1556. Within the next decade, the order grew to 3.500. It reached 5.000 in 1580 and 13.000 in 1615. The expansion of the Jesuit order was closely tied to the increase in the number of Jesuit schools. As the demand for schools consistently exceeded the available number of Jesuits, the order required a steady increase in new members (Eire, 2016).

A key aspect of Jesuits' spirituality was the *Spiritual Exercises*, the book written by Ignatius and received papal approval in 1548, which emphasized rigorous self-discipline and devotion to God. According to Diarmaid MacCulloch (2005), the *Spiritual Exercises* became one of the most influential books in the history of the Western Church.

Unlike other orders, the Jesuits had no uniform attire, fixed prayer times and communal prayer (O'Malley, 1993; Eire, 2016). Jesuits did not seek to become an order characterized by an enclosed monastic life, as they aimed to achieve a fully spiritual life while working actively on different continents (MacCulloch, 2005). They also avoided extreme fasting or practices of self-mortification as such exertions would have hindered their spiritual aims and their ability to carry out their mission. Every Jesuit represented his whole community wherever he was in mission (Eire, 2016).

The Jesuits quickly became the main defenders of Catholicism and promoters of reformed Catholic religious education. Their activities had a crucial effect on spreading the Counter-Reformation. Through their commitment to education and missions, the Jesuits helped to strengthen the authority of the Church and spread the message of the Council of Trent in and beyond Europe.

In conclusion, the Counter-Reformation was a multidimensional movement that reformed the Catholic Church and reshaped European society, by leading to a deepened divide between Protestant and Catholic states and a series of bloody conflicts. Among these, the most significant was the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). The end of the war by the Peace of Westphalia (1648) marked the beginning of a new era for Europe, characterized by the lack of religious unity within the continent (MacCulloch, 2005).

Alongside the wars, the prosecutions on charges of witch crafting reached their peak affecting both Protestants and Catholic areas. The executions were high in numbers from 1560 until the end of the 17th century in many areas of Europe. However, the wave of witch-hunting reached Eastern Europe lately and the executions remained also throughout the 18th century in regions like Poland, Hungary and Transylvania. While in Western Europe the majority of victims were female, in Northern and Eastern regions like Scandinavia, Finland, Balkans, Poland

and Russia the gender prevalence was reversed, probably due to the widely distributed eastern institution of male shamans (MacCulloch, 2005).

Today, one of the main debates regarding the inclusiveness of Christianity is about LGBTQIA+ rights and gender equality. The Catholic Church has a long history of condemning homosexuality by naming it “sodomy”, with a referral to God’s destruction of the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:16-33, 19:1-29), and positioning it as equivalent to heresy since it violates natural law. It was consequently perceived as a violation of God's established order by the medieval Inquisition courts (Menozzi, 1993). The impact of this long-lasting tradition against homosexuality was visible in widely circulated texts for the training of clergy. For example, the Dissertatio in sextum decalogi praeceptum published in 1824 by Jean-Baptiste Bouvier (1783-1854) condemned homosexuality severely alongside other deviated acts such as prostitution of women and the practices of autoeroticism. However, the most repugnant for him remained homosexuality. With the advancements in medicine during the 19th century, the condemnation of homosexuality by the Church was linked to the “scientific facts” which described homosexuality as a psychological, physical and pathological condition of one, assimilable to an illness (Torchiani, 2021).

The first Pope to address homosexuality extensively within the framework of Catholic teaching was Pope John Paul II (1920-2005) while maintaining his traditional stance. In a letter titled *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* written in 1986 under the authoring of then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (1927-2022), who would later become Pope Benedict XVI, during the papacy of Pope John Paul II, it is stated that “The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law.” It further argued the belief that homosexual behaviors were compulsive and far from being a deliberate choice and stated “What is at all costs to be avoided is the unfounded and demeaning assumption that the sexual behaviour of homosexual persons is always and totally compulsive and therefore inculpable.”

Regarding gender equality within the Catholic Church, the Holy See's intervention at the 61st Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations on the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women held in 2007,

during the papacy of Pope Benedict XVI, provides a significant synthesis of the Catholic Church's stance, by emphasizing "the recognition of both the difference and complementarity between men and women. Without this recognition the struggle for equality would not be authentic."

Pope Francis (born in 1936), brought a broader and more accommodating approach. His most important annotation on homosexuality came the same year as the beginning of his papacy, in 2013. Regarding a question on Monsignor Ricca, accused of having had a homosexual relationship, Pope Francis responded "If someone is gay and is searching for the Lord and has good will, then who am I to judge him?" His statement marked a turning point in the Catholic Church's approach regarding homosexuality.

In April 2016, when announcing his upcoming trip to the island of Lesbos in Greece, known to give the etymological roots to the word "lesbian" by reference to the ancient poet Sappho of Lesbos, he stated, "It is likewise true that being Christian does not render us flawless." and added, "Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future." Even though he did not cite the resource, the phrase was Oscar Wilde's (Torchiani, 2021).

As noted by Francesco Torchiani (2021), his attitude toward homosexuality oscillated over time between inclusionism and exclusionism. In 2018, he stated "In our societies it even seems that homosexuality is fashionable and that mentality, in some way, also influences the life of the church." with a referral to homosexuality among the clergy. This statement was in contradiction with his initial stance towards homosexuality.

A recent remarkable moment in Pope Francis's positive approach towards homosexuality was his handwritten letter of 2023 to James Martin, a Jesuit priest from the United States who carries out his apostolate among LGBTQIA+ people. Pope Francis underlined that when considering homosexuality as a crime, "one must also consider the circumstances, which may decrease or eliminate fault."

In May 2024, Pope Francis signed another controversy during a private gathering held at the Italian Bishops' Conference (CEI). In this gathering, it was reported that he used a derogatory term during a discussion on the admission of homosexual seminarians. His comment led to a backlash against his inclusive approach. The

press office of the Holy See quickly issued an apology, emphasizing that the Pope's words were taken out of context and he never meant to offend or express himself in homophobic terms and he extended his apologies to those who were offended by the use of the term. Despite his constant controversies, Pope Francis' papacy continues to be the most inclusive one by considering the Catholic Church's stance for centuries before him.

Pope Francis called also for tolerance and acceptance towards migrants, which was symbolized by the act of *pedilavium*, the feet-washing ceremony, of eleven refugees, among them three Muslims and one Hindu, that occurred in 2016. In his attitude, Pope Francis seems to seek to overcome the identity entrenchment of his predecessors not only around homosexuality but also in the theme of migration (Torchiani, 2021). With this act of *pedilavium*, he faced the question of migration by giving it a symbolic role within his communication strategy. His further actions such as his prayers for migrants lost at sea, his statement that the Mediterranean Sea, "*Mare nostrum*" which was "a place of communication between peoples and civilizations, has become a cemetery." and his blessings to the crew of Mediterranea Saving Humans and Migrantes who rescue people attempting the dangerous sea crossing are among many recent examples of his positive attitude toward migrants.

The Orthodox Christian Church, whose origins and various ramifications are not discussed in this research as it would go further the research objectives, also maintains a traditional stance regarding LGBTQIA+ and gender equality issues. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I (born in 1940), Archbishop of Constantinople, condemned homosexuality and same-sex marriages in various speeches. However, within the Greek-Orthodox Church, there might be room also for those who support a more inclusive approach. Archbishop Elpidophoros (born in 1967) of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, is known to have served the Greek Orthodox Church's "first openly gay Baptism" in 2022 in Greece. The situation has escalated to the point that the Prime Minister of Greece, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, intervened discussing the matter directly with Patriarch Bartholomew I, urging for Archbishop Elpidophoros' replacement to restore unity in the Greek-American community.

Protestant churches hold different perspectives regarding LGBTQIA+ acceptance within the church and gender equality issues. While many of them follow a progressive approach to accepting diversity, some are still more traditional. To cite only a few in Europe, the Evangelical Church in Germany (one of the largest protestant bodies in the world), the Church of Sweden (the largest Lutheran denomination in Europe), the Church of Norway and the Protestant Church in the Netherlands largely support the same-sex marriage, ordain women as early as the late 1950s and beginnings of the 1960s and, more recently, ordain women also at higher levels such as bishops. In the United States, the United Church of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and Presbyterian Church (USA) are major denominations that fully accept LGBTQIA+ people and provide gender equality.

2.3. Secularization in Islam under the Shadow of Extremisms

When discussing whether secularization might be compatible with Islamic values, it is often easy to be driven by ideas shaped around the Western point of view of the Near East. The interest that the Western world has to divide the world into regions and "observe" the East led to the establishment of Orientalism nurtured by the European imperialism of the 18th and 19th centuries which led to a superficial image of the East (Said, 2001). Edward W. Said further states that Islam too, was "domesticated" by Orientalism and its values were put under the monopoly of Western knowledge, to the point that Muslim people were erroneously called "Mohammedan", followers of Mohammed, by Christian thinkers who tried to understand Islam by trying to find an analogy between Christianity and Islam. Since Jesus Christ constituted the basis of the Christian faith, it was incorrectly assumed that Mohammed was to Islam as Christ was to Christianity (Daniel, 1960).

To avoid such a bias in studying the Islamic path to secularization, it is crucial to note that the term secularization may not be perceived as the Western world understands the term. As discussed earlier, secularization is rather a complex and ambiguous term, whose meaning is closely linked to the perceptions of the inhabitants of the area being studied and their history. As noted by T. Jeremy Gunn (2004), the term "*laïcité*" in France might have the connotation of protecting the

state from the interventions of religion, while the term "religious freedom" in the United States would be more likely to be understood as religion being protected from the interventions of the state.

While admitting the fluidity of the meaning of the term secularization, it is still possible to agree upon the idea that in Western minds the term is associated with positive annotations. However, in the Muslim world, it rather has a poor reputation. Nader Hashemi (2009) states that "in the eyes of Muslim communities globally, [...] secularism is an inherently anti-Muslim political doctrine that persists at the expense of the civil rights of Muslims." According to Hashemi, in Indonesia, being the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, the term "secularism" is understood as synonymous with irreligiosity or even atheism. The difference in perceiving the term secularization is a fact to be kept in mind when referring to a possible Islamic reformation.

Among some scholars, there has been an awaiting for an Islamic leader who will guide the Islamic Reformation as Luther did with the Protestant Reformation. This expectation is mainly based on a simple calculus. As the Protestant Reformation had its roots in the 14th-century proto-Protestants like John Wycliffe (1324-1384) and Jan Hus (1369-1415), a similar awakening phase is to be expected also among Muslims, as Islam is living its 14th century since its foundation. These scholars argue that Muslims today are widely questioning the foundations of the Islamic faith worldwide in a way that their predecessors could never have imagined and that this could be a sign of the early footsteps of Islamic reform (Eickelman, 1998). Additionally, the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism, which is perceived as a great threat to the Western World, is also seen as an indication of a future Islamic reform as the Protestant Reformation emerged from a chaotic period of religious turmoil (Hashemi, 2003).

Among these scholars, Albert Hourani (1983) discusses that Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (circa 1839-1897), an Islamic ideologist and an important figure in modern Islamic history, was convinced that Islam needed its own Luther. Al-Afghani might have imagined himself with this duty (Maghribi, 1924). Also Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), a Muslim reformer and philosopher from India, emphasized the need for a Luther for Islamic reformation (Sıddıki, 1990). Musa Jarullah Bigi (circa

1875-1949), a Tatar theologian philosopher and one of the most important figures of the modernist Islamic movement in Russia named the Jadid movement, saw the Protestant Reformation as the foundation of civilization (Bigi, 2002).

W. S. Blunt (1975), a British writer, poet and diplomat known for his anti-imperialist views, observed as early as 1882 the similarities between the Protestant Reformation and the Wahhabi movement initiated by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (circa 1703-1792), a Sunni scholar from the Uyayna village in Najd, situated in the internal part of the Arabian Peninsula (Dallal, 2010). It has been stated that Wahhabism resembles the Protestant Reformation with its tradition, rituals and criticism of the Saints’ shrines and excessively decorated mosques. According to Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, the true Islam was that of the first generation of Muslims, named “*al-salaf al-salih*” meaning “the pious forerunners”. He protested against acts that constituted unbelief among Muslims and later innovations (*bid’a*) which, according to him, brought other gods into Islam, notions that are known respectively as “*kufr*” and “*shirk*” in Islamic literature (Hourani, 1983, Dallal, 2010). He was against the later development of mystical thought, the ascetic renunciation of the goods of the world, the organizational brotherhoods (*tariqat*) and rituals that the Quran did not prescribe. Despite his great reverence towards Mohammad, he did not approve of the excessive cult of him as a perfect man. He opposed the worship of Islamic Saints and reverence for their shrines. Finally, he was against the return to Islam of the customs and practices of the *Jāhiliyya*, the pre-Islamic period. The Wahhabi movement was close to a genuine true reform as it stressed Islam’s non-conformity to its initial values at its core, focusing on the necessity for a moral and doctrinal overhaul and a return to the fundamental principles of Islam (Hourani, 1983).

Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab started preaching his doctrine in the early 1740s, centered around the concept of “*tawḥīd*”, the term emphasizing God’s unicity and uniqueness within the Islamic literature. His preaches often classified people into two broad categories, believers and unbelievers (Dallal, 2010).

His greatest enemy was Muslims who failed to adhere to his strict interpretation of Islam, particularly in matters of monotheism, rather than oppressors toward the Muslim population. Therefore, his doctrine provided a grim and narrow theory

with a great emphasis on unbelief. His preachings did not generate a meaningful discussion that could justify its perpetuation as a legitimate theoretical reading of Islam. However, the Wahhabi movement's alliance with the Al Saud family made the movement gain political power and led to the establishment of the first Saudi state, the Emirate of Diriyah, in the 18th century and today Wahhabism remains the foundation of Saudi Arabia's religious and political structure (Dallal, 2010). However, besides the Arabian peninsula, the Wahhabi movement has not become a massive reformist movement.

Throughout the 18th century, new local reformers emerged in many areas of the world: among them, it is possible to cite Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Amir al-San'ani (1688-1768) who was one of the central figures in the tradition of Yemeni reform. He was born into Zaydism, a branch of Shia Islam, but declared himself to be an independent thinker since the early years of his life, which caused discontent among the Zaydi sects. He served as the imam of the great mosque of San'a, in Yemen. He was later imprisoned by the rulers of the city following an accusation of dropping the name of the Zaydi imams from the Friday sermon. Succesively, he traveled to Mecca and Medina where he encountered the traditional Sunni scholarship. However, since his independence was unwelcome even there, he went back to the northern parts of Yemen where he spent the rest of his life sheltered from public criticism (Shawkani, 2006). Even though San'ani initially supported the ideals of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, to the point that he even dedicated his poems to him, he later saw that his political stance was far from being radical and he did not express concerns about social and political issues (Dallal, 2010). He accused ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab of knowing little about this Islamic law (*sharīʿa*) and not examining it carefully (San'ani, 1986). San'ani, in contrast, was much interested in social and political affairs. He indirectly did not hesitate in expressing his criticism towards the religious establishment and the rulers of Yemen (Dallal, 2010).

San'ani's ideals were inherited by his successor Muhammad ibn-Ali al-Shawkani (1759-1834) with a Zaydi background from Yemen. He served as a chief judge under three of the imams of San'a. He wrote more than 150 books and dealt with the international and regional political dimensions of his time. His influence went beyond Yemen, reaching India and North Africa. Like San'ani, also Shawkani

had initial sympathy towards Wahhabism but later positioned himself as the complete opposite. However, he still noted that tribes that went under the control of the Wahhabis and many Syrian nomads who were living between Hijaz and Saada started to observe the rituals of Islam, who before barely knew about Islam. Differently from Wahhabism, Shawkani stated that true faith (*imān*) can be found even with elements of hidden association or polytheism (*shirk*) in some believers (Shawkani, 1994). Shawkani, too, had strict rules on what constitutes unbelief, as ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab did, however, he aimed to avoid taking legal actions against a Muslim who was accused of being an unbeliever or of other major religious offences (Dallal, 2010).

Shah Wali Allah from India (1703-1762) is another example of Muslim reformers. His being a Sufi, a mystical branch of Islam, gives him a special place among the other reformers. He lived in a political and religious turmoil phase in India, following The invasion of Nadir Shah in 1739 and the subsequent looting of Delhi significantly weakened the Muslims, making them more susceptible to attacks from various non-Muslim groups. Despite he did not mention ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab or Wahhabism in his writings, he was a follower of the ideas of Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240), the poem and philosopher who ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab denounced as an unbeliever anyone who refrains from denouncing him. Therefore, the incompatibility of the ideas of Shah Wali Allah with those of ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab was clear. Moreover, Shah Wali Allah had many social concerns, among them the concept of unity among the people. His definition of belief and unbelief, too, differed from that of Wahhabism, as he made a distinction between this-worldly and other-worldly faith. The first is faith based on the actions in this world, the second one is the faith that will define a person’s status after death (Dallal, 2010). Another distinctive element of Wali Allah’s philosophy is the distinction between the first and the second *Jāhiliyyas*. In the first, people refused to believe that God is the creator, in the second, they turned away from God and failed to obey as they should (Wali Allah, 1970).

Another important reformer to cite is Usman dan Fodio (1754-1817) who led one of the most important and discussed jihadist movements of West and East Africa that concluded itself in the establishment of the Sokoto caliphate in present-

day northern Nigeria, where Dan Fodio was born. He became a mobile teacher in the 1770s and through the mid-1790s he taught people the proper practice of Islam (Dallal, 2010). As Dan Fodio argued against Muslim fellows with beliefs contaminated by innovations and heresies, many scholars often saw his stance as similar to the Wahhabi movement (Hiskett, 1964; Roff, 1987). For him, Muslims were suffering from two interrelated problems: the erroneous practice of Islam and social injustice. Glorifying stones and trees, receiving consultations from magicians and venerating the tombs of important people were among many acts qualified as erroneous practices. However, despite his emphasis on the improper practice of Islam that led to *kufr*, Dan Fodio's main concern remained the social one. In contrast to ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, for Dan Fodio the faith was not an aim *per se*, it was rather an integral part of his larger scheme of social reform. His popularity was on the rise as he gained many followers. Around 1795 his preachings reached a universal aim characterized by social and political concerns, which led him to declare jihad, the holy war, in 1804 and establish the Sokoto caliphate in 1806. His movement led to many other movements in West Africa (Dallal, 2010).

As illustrated, the reform movements across different Muslim populations, even though at first glance they might seem similar to the Protestant Reformation as they argued to purify the religion from those elements that were not stated in the holy book, were also different since they were against people with wrong beliefs rather than a larger religious authority. The comparative studies between the Protestant Reformation and these Islamic reformers became popular in the 20th century. Hakan Olgun (2008) defines three major approaches in observing the comparative reform scholars' works: the sociological and analogizing approach, the pluralist hermeneutic approach and the rejectionist and contextual differentiating approach.

The sociological and analogizing approach deals with these two religions in terms of their historical dimensions rather than their theological content. This approach is based on the observation of some recent Muslim thinkers who have spoken of the illegitimacy of the authorities trying to obscure the prevalence of the Quran over oral tradition (*ḥadīth*) and to intervene between God and people's understanding of the religion (Olgun, 2008), as the Catholic Church did for centuries before Luther appealed for a reform. The scholars following this approach

are convinced that the Islamic tradition is being questioned in recent times like never before and the democratization of Islamic interpretations is an ongoing process. They emphasize the importance of cultural factors such as the spread of higher education in Muslim countries, mass media and the development of communication methods. They argue that these cultural and technological advancements produced a similar impact to that of the invention of the printing press during the 15th century. As a result, they observe the increase in the literacy rate in Muslim countries and the spread of secular education as factors that increase the chances of a Muslim reformation (Mandaville, 2007).

The pluralist hermeneutic approach, instead, emphasizes that in addition to the opposition towards the authorities holding a monopoly on religious knowledge, there should be also a theological reform consisting of the reinterpretation of the Quran. A revision of Islamic tradition and new methodological approaches to understanding the Quran are argued by these scholars. They call for a need to redefine Islam within its social context, rather than returning to its fundaments (Wright, 1996).

Lastly, the rejectionist and contextual differentiating approach believes that Islam and Christianity are inherently different from each other and that highlighting their similarities would not yield accurate results (Olgun, 2008). The most important difference between the two is that Christianity has a clear division between what belongs to Ceasar and what belongs to God, while Islam has no distinction between the political and the spiritual spheres. The dichotomy of *regnum* and *sacerdotium*, which is situated at the heart of the history of Western Christianity, had no equivalent in Islam. As described earlier, the early Muslim community centered around the prophet Mohammad soon became a political and religious community. From the Islamic perspective, there is no Ceasar, but only God, who is perceived to be the only sovereign and the only source of law. Mohammad taught and ruled on God's behalf. Following the death of Mohammad in 633 AD, "caliph" was the title taken by his first successor, Abu Bakr, whose accession to the leadership of the Islamic community marked the foundation of the great historical institution of the "caliphate". It is not possible to equate the Caliph to the Pope, likewise, it would not be correct to use the word "Mosque" (being the

place of prayer) as one addresses “Church” (being both the place of prayer and the great corpus of religious institution). Similarly, in Islam there is no clergy, priests, sacraments and many other elements that are at the core of Christianity (Lewis, 2003).

Salwa Ismail (2004) argues for the impossibility and futility of a comparison between Christianity and Islam, which would lead to a Euro-centric approach toward Islam and push Muslim societies into an anachronistic historical trajectory. She states that bringing such an analogy would even damage the contemporary Islamic reform projects. As noted by Abdou Filali-Ansary (1999), “the Muslim world, secularization is preceding religious reformation—a reversal of the European experience in which secularization was more or less a consequence of such reformation.” Therefore, Islam’s path to reformation and secularization must be understood with its own parameters and its uniqueness.

RAND Corporation, a non-profit global policy research organization based in California, United States, providing services to both the public and private sectors around the world in improving decision-making processes, deals with the impact of Islamic fundamentalism over the secularization and democratization process in Islam in one of its reports titled *Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies* from 2003 under the authoring of Cheryl Benard. The RAND Corporation is known to be funded both by public and private resources, being its most important funder the United States government. According to the Corporation’s website, their greatest funders for the 2023 financial year are the Office of the U.S. Secretary of Defense and other national security agencies, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and related agencies. Among their top clients, instead, we observe the U.S. Government alongside the U.S. State and Local Governments. Despite their explicit statement on conducting “also” independent research, their alliance with the United States government might put a shadow on reading their independent claimed reports. This specific report written by Cheryl Benard explicitly states that it was sponsored by the Smith Richardson Foundation. The report shows a great example of the Western-centric view of secularization and modernization processes in Islam.

It is crucial to underline that the report was written in the aftermath of the September 11 Attacks, the event that has shaped the perception of Islam in the Western world and caused many to reaffirm that Islamic fundamentalism is one of the greatest threats to secularization and modernity.

The report discusses the intellectual orientation in Muslim societies under four headings:

(1) Fundamentalists, who reject democratic values and modern Western culture, aim for an authoritarian state under their interpretation of Islamic law. They share a "puritanical" view of Islamic law and morality.

(2) Traditionalists, who prefer a conservative society, while being suspicious of modernity, innovation and change. The report underlines their not necessarily violent nature.

(3) Modernists, who advocate for the Islamic world to adopt global modernity. They have a reformer vision towards Islam to align it with the democratic values of the century.

(4) Secularists, who seek a clear separation between religion and state within the Islamic world and aim to keep religion exclusively in the private sphere.

Without any surprise, the report addresses the fundamentalist Muslims to be the enemy of the West and particularly of the United States and underlines their "intent, to varying degrees, on damaging and destroying democratic modernity." (Benard, 2003).

The report claims modernist and secularist Muslims to be the closest to the West in their values and policies. However, these two groups are generally in a weaker position than the others, due to their lack of "powerful backing, financial resources, an effective infrastructure, and a public platform." (Benard, 2003).

The report, in combatting fundamentalists, underlines the importance of encouraging a positive change in the Islamic world empowered by wider democracy and the installation of modernity within the texture of Muslim societies. This has been shown as the only way to reach compatibility between the Muslim world and the Western world. In establishing this order, greater support towards modernist

Muslims, criticist propaganda against fundamentalist Islam among the traditional Muslims (since they are more vulnerable to collaborate with the fundamentalists) and a greater opposition towards fundamentalists by emphasizing their linkages to illegality and violence are advised in the report. Furthermore, the report calls for selective support of secular Muslims, while encouraging them in their negative opinions towards fundamentalists, discouraging "secularist alliance with anti-U.S. forces on such grounds as nationalism and leftist ideology." (Benard, 2003).

The report maintains a focus on the internal ideological struggle within the Islamic world by emphasizing human rights concerns, particularly with a great discussion on women's rights concerns. The report offers a condemnation of violence against women, the widespread practice of polygamy among fundamentalist Muslim men, modest dress codes imposed on women and other elements highly contrasting with Western values. The report underlines the negative implications of these practices for global peace and security (Benard, 2003).

The report seems an accurate result of the Western-centered solution to fundamentalist Islam's threats. The vision of Islam, especially fundamentalist Islam, as a major threat to the Western world was aggravated over the last decades of the past century by the overthrown governments to establish a religious regime, unresolvable political crises and religious-driven terrorist attacks in different parts of the globe. To cite only a few most important, the Islamic revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran, the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan were events that all happened in 1979 and helped to aggravate the negative impression that the West had towards Islam. The assassination of Anwar Sadat in Egypt in 1981, the First (1987-1993) and Second Intifadas (2000-2005) in Israel and occupied Palestinian territories, ISIS' activities in the Middle East, Taliban's supremacy in Afghanistan by recapturing Kabul in 2021 and the war between Israel and Hamas started in October 2023 are all events that have contributed and continue to contribute a distorted vision of Islam being equal to chaos, wars, terrorism, oppression and exclusion of women and many others. However, it should be noted that these extremist movements do not represent the views or beliefs of the majority of Muslims worldwide.

Unlike what was described by Samuel P. Huntington stating "The West was the West long before it was modern.", the West indeed had to go through centuries of feudalism, clerical dominance, censorship and widespread illiteracy to then, thanks to the great scholars of Renaissance and Enlightenment, began to emerge from this darkness of ignorance, leading to a long and bloody period of political and religious turmoil in Europe. While this does not justify the terrorism and extremism perpetrated by Islamic fundamentalists, when discussing Islamic fundamentalism it is crucial to consider the historical processes that have led the West to be "the West."

It is crucial that when Europe grappled with pervasive religious wars and conflicts in the 17th century, the Ottoman Empire exemplified a remarkable tolerance towards various religions. As the Empire expanded its territories, it maintained a system based on the concept of "*dhimma*" stated in the Quran, a contractual agreement between Muslim rulers and non-Muslim subjects, that allowed Christians and Jews to coexist peacefully alongside Muslims. As noted by Denis Lacorne (2018), non-Muslim populations lived within the Ottoman Empire for centuries without undergoing ghettoization, which characterized many European cities during the same period, for many centuries. They had their own legal systems and religious authorities, allowing them to govern their personal and communal matters according to their beliefs. This Ottoman model of governance, referred to as the "*millet*" (meaning "people, community") system, illustrates an inclusive approach to religious diversity. This system guaranteed a degree of autonomy to each group of non-Muslims, enabling them to preserve their cultural and religious identities.

However, it is crucial to note that it was rather a strategic choice to governate the wast lands of the Ottoman Empire, among them also some areas like the Balkans where 82% of the tax-paying households were Orthodox Christians according to the census taken between 1520 and 1535 (Lacorne, 2019). Moreover, non-Muslims were subject to higher taxes, named *jizya* (Bensoussan, 2012), had limitations in the construction of houses as they shall not exceed the dimensions of Muslims' houses and were allowed to only renovate existing Churches and Synagogues rather than construct new ones. However, some of these rules have been also violated

(Bosworth, 1982; Brenner, 2010; Bensoussan, 2012). In the light of these rules, it is possible to state that the supremacy of the Islamic religion was accepted and non-Muslim populations did not have the same rights as Muslims did, at least until *Tanzimat Fermanı* (1839) and *Islahat Fermanı* (1856) which were reform edicts characterizing the Ottoman Empire's last stages that brought the Empire the French penal code, establishment of a single court for all except for divorce and inheritance law and equal rights to non-Muslims (Rodrigue, 1995). Therefore, it can be argued that the East was, in many aspects, more modern than the West for centuries. The Ottoman Empire's millet system stands as a testament to this idea, despite admitting the strategic dimension of the system and its lack of equity for all.

Concerning the Islamic fundamentalism, as Maxime Rodinson stated during an interview with Gilbert Achcar in 1986,

> *Islamic fundamentalism is a temporary, transitory movement, but it could last another 30 or 50 years—I don't know how long. Where fundamentalism isn't in power it will continue to be an ideal, as long as the basic frustration and discontent persist that lead people to take extreme positions. You need long experience with clericalism to finally get fed up with it—look how much time it took in Europe!*

In conclusion, Islamic fundamentalism is neither fully representative of Islam as a religion nor is a permanent condition. It is rather a reaction to underlying political frustrations and discontent. It may, and most likely will, take a long time before the forces of extremism are fully outgrown within Islamic societies. The efforts for a proper Islamic Reform, though slow and uneven, are part of a broader historical process and acknowledging this trajectory is vital in understanding the potential for progressive transformation in the Muslim world. To confirm this trajectory, it is enough to think about the Arab Spring that took place in the Middle East and North Africa in 2010 and 2011 and the recent transformational social reform processes in Saudi Arabia, which after many years of struggle, gave women their, despite still limited, fundamental rights. Just as the West has struggled for its values centuries ago, so there may be a possibility for Muslim populations too, as long as reformist voices continue to challenge the status quo.

CHAPTER II – COMBATTING THE OTHER

1. Politics, Religion and Discrimination

The relationship between political power and religion is a fundamental element of human history, which has influenced and continues to influence governments, social systems and cultures. Religion, which is profoundly linked to the distinctions between the sacred and the profane, has not only offered moral and ethical justification for the exercise of power and violence but has also been employed to validate political authority by strengthening the governor's power. From the divine rights of ancient kings and emperors to contemporary discussions about religion's place in politics, understanding the connection between political power and religion is essential for comprehending the origins and extensions of political violence, exercised both by state and non-state actors.

The relationship between politics and religion is also linked to a third concept, religious discrimination, as religious beliefs might delineate and marginalize specific groups within society. Political leaders often use religious rhetoric to set themselves aligned with the traditional values of certain groups and attract broad support. The line between sincere religiosity and the strategic use of religion for political ends is often unclear. This connection will be further observed within the case of the United States, where civil religion is vital to national identity, as well as in countries like Italy, where religious symbols and values were deeply embedded in the emphasis on nationalism during the Fascist era.

Therefore, investigating the dynamics between political power and religion, focusing on how religious ideologies have influenced political authority both historically and contemporarily, the evolution of civil and political religions in modern states and analyzing religious discrimination, as well as other forms of discrimination is crucial to have a broad vision regarding the trio composed by religion, politics and discrimination.

1.1. Political Power and Religion

Historian of religion Mircea Eliade (1957) clearly distinguishes between chaos and cosmos. While the first one is characterized by disorder and unpredictability, the second one is characterized by a divine order created by the Gods through rituals. According to him, chaos and cosmos coexist, as sacred spaces embody the order of the divinity, while other areas remain in a state of undifferentiated chaos. The concept of sacred is intimately connected to power, with the creation of sacred space often involving a re-enactment of the original divine act of creation done by the Gods. Therefore, when a foreign and savage territory is taken into possession by those holding power, the first act is to transform the chaos into the cosmos by the divine act of creation. In doing so, the *homo religiosus* seeks to align with the divine order, imitating the actions of the Gods (Eliade, 1957).

Mircea Eliade states that there is no homogeneity of space in the world. Borders and verges divide the space into two opposite concepts, the sacred and the profane. The entrance of a Church creates a division between the street, the profane and the Church, the sacred. The *homo religiosus* performs the act of imitating God also through hierophany, the manifestation of the sacred. By attributing sacredness to objects, places and moments, individuals experience a connection with the divine. This is reflected in the Biblical passage where God tells Moses, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." (Exodus 3:5), as also individuals create sacred places with a clear distinction from the profane world (Eliade, 1957).

According to Mircea Eliade (1957), the majority of modern individuals who believe in being freed from the ancient religious beliefs and traditions are, in fact, still holding to a sort of pseudo-religion characterized by myths and traditions, as their *homo religiosus* ancestors were. Despite thinking their understanding of the world is no longer based on religion, these modern individuals still understand and evaluate the world with religious terms and ideas. Therefore, according to him, even the most desacralized existence still preserves evidence of a religious valorization of the world as modernity has not completely erased religious structures from human consciousness.

This religious conception of the world is crucial in understanding the concept of "secular religion". The secular religion refers to a system of beliefs, myths, rituals and symbols that, to varying degrees, attribute a sense of sacredness to a worldly subject, by transforming it into a cult object that inspires worship and devotion. Politics is not the only domain affected by this phenomenon: any human activity, from science to the New Age spiritual practices, can be manifested with this secular sacredness and become the focus of a secular cult, thereby forming a secular religion (Gentile, 2006).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his magnum opus *The Social Contract* (1762), introduced the concept of "civil religion" which has sparked an almost three centuries-long debate. He defined civil religion as a set of shared beliefs necessary to foster social cohesion and good citizenship within a state. For Rousseau, civil religion was not meant to replace traditional religions but only to complement them by uniting the citizens under common values that would provide stability to the state. These common values are characterized by the supremacy of the state laws. The rules of the civil religion need to be simple, limited in number and specific enough to leave no room for additional explanations and interpretations. Central to his concept is the supremacy of the law and the promotion of tolerance towards other religions, as long as these do not threaten the state's existence or undermine its authority.

Even though Rousseau was the first author to mention civil religions, the popularity of the term is thanks to Robert N. Bellah's article *Civil Religion in America* written in 1967. Before he wrote his article as an occasional contribution to the *Daedalus* conference on American religion held in May 1966, he was rather known for his works regarding the Far East, especially for his book *Tokugawa Religion* first published in 1957. His article *Civil Religion in America* received an unexpected success immediately after its publication, receiving both a great amount of appreciation and critique from various academic groups (Bortolini, 2010; 2021). Despite this article constituted a debut and landmark in Bellah's work related to American identity, as described by Matteo Bortolini (2021) in his book dedicated to the academic biography of Bellah, his ideas regarding the American civil religion were grounded in his period of stay in Japan which made him realize "how

American he was", while he was influenced by the turbulent events of the early 1960s, such as John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963 and the Vietnam War.

Bellah's theory of civil religion was not about creating a new political system like Rousseau did; it was rather an expression of the American cultural system. He argued that civil religion in the United States is a set of beliefs, symbols and rituals that provide a religious dimension to the nation's political and social life. It is not tied to a specific religious denomination. It rather reflects a shared sense of the divine, the God or the Almighty Being, guiding the society in the process of creation of the national identity. Bellah's use of the concept of civil religion created a great interest among scholars and contributed to the creation of a large literature.

Emilio Gentile (2006) is one of the authors who contributed to the debates on civil religion. He states that Rousseau's use of the term "civil religion" indeed meant a "political religion". This ambiguity brought a great confusion in these terms usage among scholars. While both terms are linked to the broader concept of secular religion, they differ significantly despite numerous scholars using these terms interchangeably without clarifying the distinctions between them. Therefore, sometimes the concept of civil religion is used for situations that should be characterized as a political religion and vice versa. Civil religions and political religions are the two primary manifestations of the sacralization of politics that have emerged in modern society, as a result of the democratic revolutions of the 18th century. Therefore, the origins of this sacralization process lie in the emerging secularized ideas over life, society and the state which were fostered by the atmosphere created by the Enlightenment. Politically, this sacralization was made possible following the victory of the state sovereignty over the Church's authority and the exaltation of nationalist ideas as the highest ideal, demanding the loyalty, devotion and commitment of citizens (Gentile, 2006).

The term political religion is greatly associated with the Austrian philosopher Eric Voegelin who described the term in one of his early works named *Die Politischen Religionen* (translated as "*The Political Religions*") written in 1938. According to Voegelin, as a direct consequence of the secularization process within European society, the influence of trans-worldly religions declined and was replaced by inner-worldly religions, namely nationalism and socialism. He argued

that political ideologies like nationalism and socialism had taken on quasi-religious characteristics. As traditional religious influence diminished, secular ideologies filled this space with a similar demand for adherence and belief. He believed that the new idea of man and humanity created by the secularization process made a perfect soil in which anti-Christian religious movements such as National Socialism could emerge and flourish (Burrin, 1997). Emilio Gentile (2006) describes political religion as an entity requiring an absolute submission of society to its code of commandments. As a result, political religion tends to be intolerant, intrusive and fundamentalist, striving to infiltrate all areas of personal and societal life.

Civil religion, instead, encompasses the sacralization of a political system while upholding the plurality of ideas, allowing free competition in the exercise of power and enabling citizens to constitutionally dismiss their governments when necessary. Unlike political religion, it respects individual freedom, might coexist with other ideologies and does not require mandatory or unconditional adherence to its principles (Gentile, 2006).

While the principal examples of a political religion are Fascism and Nazism, the first and most complete example of a civil religion is the United States. Emilio Gentile (2006) argues that also the Bolshevik Revolution might be described as a political religion. However, unlike Fascism and Nazism, the USSR's sacralization of politics was not limited only to its citizens. It was rather characterized by internationalism, as it aimed to promote its ideals worldwide.

This research will focus on the example of the United States as a civil religion and Fascism and Nazism, despite superficially since a broader discussion on Nazism would go beyond the research objectives, as examples of political religions.

To begin with the example of the United States as a civil religion, it is crucial to cite Alexis de Tocqueville, who is known to be the first thinker to realize the fundamental role of religion in American democracy. In his book *Democracy in America* (1835), written following his visit to the United States, he states "In France I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. But in America I found they were intimately united and that they reigned in common over the same country."

As stated in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, the church and state were constitutionally separated from the earliest times in the United States. Interestingly, despite having no constitutionally preferred religion, the United States is still a state characterized by the idea of God. This notion is best perceived in the official motto "In God We Trust", officially adopted on 30 July 1956 under the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, but already appeared as early as 1862 on a two-cent piece. Additionally, A slightly different version of this motto, "In God Is Our Trust" was embedded in the patriotic song named *The Star-Spangled Banner* which was popular since 1814 and adopted as the national anthem in 1931. Furthermore, despite there being no law rendering the phrase mandatory to recite, the presidential oath, the oath of citizenship and other military oaths contain the phrase "So help me, God", of which recitation depends on the individual preference. Therefore, the United States, despite having no state religion, allegedly believes in God (Gentile, 2006).

Emilio Gentile (2006) states that this peculiarity of the United States is not a contradiction to the principle of separation of the church and the state, as outlined in the Constitution. The expressions of religious faith referring to an Almighty God are found in the mottos, symbols and political rituals of the United States. This situation is caused by the invocation of God in these symbols and rituals, which reflects a distinct form of religion that is not tied to any specific religion practiced by its citizens. The God to which these political symbols are referring is not the God of a certain religion. Therefore, Gentile (2006) states that this situation as a civil religion.

Among the first immigrants to the new continent, especially among Puritans escaping England, there was a common belief to be the "new people of Israel" which were ordained to establish a new sacred state characterized by freedom, independence and democracy (Knight, 1994) in these newly found lands. Their establishment was led by George Washington, the "American Moses". This is how the myth of the chosen people was born in America, founded on the religious rhetoric of a new covenant between God and the immigrants. It is possible to observe that this myth is one of the pervasive ideologies of American society and is still active today (Gentile, 2006).

The sacred scriptures of these people were the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, as they were perceived as the new Ten Commandments. This civil religion had also its own martyrs: such as Abraham Lincoln, John Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. It had its own temples: the monument to Washington, the Lincoln Memorial and Arlington Cemetery. It also had its sermons and liturgy: the presidential inaugural speeches, Independence Day, Thanksgiving Day and Memorial Day (Gentile, 2006). Despite the civil religion of the United States being derived from Protestantism, more precisely from Puritanism (Knight, 1994), it managed to differentiate itself and became a purely civic belief that unified both Christian and non-Christian confessions under its great umbrella (Gentile, 2006). In this way, the Puritans' struggle for their identity in England was resolved by the new order they established in America (Perry, 1944).

On the other hand, the other type of civil religion, political religion, is crucial to understand in observing the nexus between religion and politics. The political religions of Fascism and Nazism, which were fruits of the accentuated sense of nationality and patriotism emerging as the primary force behind the intense sacralization of politics with the First World War, were both centralized by the martyrdom and the cult of the war dead (Bastide, 1975).

Fascism was the first nationalist movement that fully displayed the characteristics of a political religion. It was called "totalitarian" first by Giovanni Amendola in 1923, who introduced this overloaded term to the literature. The regime proudly embraced the term by declaring itself to be totalitarian. It was a complex system of beliefs, myths, rituals and symbols that deified the nation and state and celebrated the personality cult of "*Il Duce*", Benito Mussolini, as a living myth. However, its relationship with the Catholic Church has been unsteady (Gentile, 2006). As described by Jacques Maritain (1936), fascism did not attempt to eliminate religion as communism was attempting to do, it instead aimed "to take it over and practically take possession of people's consciences."

One of the examples of this aim to appropriate the religion was embodied in the figure of the Saint Catherine of Siena whose image and legacy have been used for the various political ends of the Fascist era in Italy. However, the figure of Saint Catherine as a national saint was not new. Gerald Parsons (2008) states that "even

before the advent of the Fascist period [...] Catherine and her cult had been associated not only with Italian national identity, but also with an assertive Italian nationalism and with a foreign policy that included the use of military power and the vocabulary of the crusade".

Saint Catherine was proclaimed as co-patron of Rome in 1866 by Pope Pius IX. However, her re-emergence as an absolute national cult had to wait until 1926, which was a crucial year for the relations between fascism and Catholicism. In 1926, the cult of Saint Catherine was consolidating (Biasiori, 2012) alongside that of Saint Francis of Assisi. As it was the 700th anniversary of the death of Saint Francis, the year 1926 was proclaimed as the Holy Franciscan Year by Mussolini (Adamson, 2014) alongside his designation of October 4, the day marking Saint Francis's death, as a national holiday. These events helped to show the fascist regime's support for Catholicism and its commitment to integrating religious traditions into the national identity (Torchiani, 2011). He gave speeches where he accounts the "poor man from Assisi" as "the most saintly Italian, and the most Italian of the saints" (Ardali, 1926). In his speeches, Saint Francis was portrayed as a symbol of apostolic fervor advocating for expanding Italy's borders, casting him almost as an irredentist or a virile (Adamson, 2014).

Local officials and Catholic bodies operating particularly in Umbria, where Assisi is located, played a role in the propagation of the fascist image of Saint Francis. As an example of the local figures, it is possible to cite Arnaldo Fortini, the mayor of Assisi from 1923 to 1944, who was a crucial figure in organizing the centenary celebrations in Assisi which were held with notable participation both from church and government officials, symbolizing the unity between the Church and the state. The cooperation between local authorities and the fascist regime in promoting Saint Francis as a cultural icon emphasized a new form of Italian identity, blended with nationalism and Christianity (Torchiani, 2011). The fascist regime, therefore, used religious figures to further solidify its influence in Italian society and to establish a cultural link between nationalism and Catholicism, with Saint Catherine and Saint Francis serving as symbolic bridges.

Additionally, regarding the relationship between the fascist regime and religion, within the same year, in 1926, Mussolini suffered the second of the four

assassination attempts he had within two years following his dictatorship (Adamson, 2014) and his survival contributed to the idea that he was under a kind of divine protection (Luzzatto, 2005).

Especially in the 1930s, during the apex of the Fascist regime, the image of Saint Catherine was co-opted to promote Italian nationalism and militarism by framing her as a symbol of the reconciliation between the Church and the state after the Lateran Pacts of 1929. She was designated as co-patron of Italy in 1939 alongside the Saint Francis of Assisi (Biasiori, 2012). Walter L. Adamson (2014) states that the Lateran Pacts while reconciling the fascist state and the Church, allowed Fascism to integrate Catholic symbols and maintain a degree of "cohabitation" with the Church, even as it sought to dominate the political sphere.

As a political symbol, Saint Catherine's image was transformed by making her lose her femininity and adopting a masculine appearance to align with Fascist militarism. Fascist ideology reframed her to serve the militaristic needs of the regime. Indeed, during the Fascist period, Saint Catherine was not only seen as a figure of religious unity but also as a supporter of Italian expansionism, particularly during Italy's colonial campaigns in Ethiopia. A similar role was attributed to her also during the Second World War (Biasiori, 2012).

The cult of Saint Catherine continued to evolve based on the proceedings of the war. By 1943, she was proclaimed the patron of Italian nurses, signaling a shift from her association with militarism to that of healing and affection in times of crisis. After the fall of Fascism, Saint Catherine's image was reinterpreted to fit the post-war period's changing social and political landscape in Italy. She was rather invoked as a symbol of peace and reconciliation. Therefore, the saint who had been the protector of the fascist armies has become the artificer of peace following the end of the war. She was also proclaimed as one of the saint patrons of Europe in 1999 by Pope John Paul II (Biasiori, 2012).

Despite widely using the figures of Saint Catherine and Saint Francis of Assisi in political rhetoric, Adamson (2014) states that Fascism has never realized its totalitarian project. It was due partly to Mussolini's pragmatic decision to avoid direct conflicts with the Church. For Mussolini, the sacralization of politics during Fascism was less about replacing the Church and more about adapting to a world

where religion and the sacred were becoming diffused across various spheres of life, including politics.

Another political religion, National Socialism, constituted a perfect example of a political religion that transformed religion more deeply. At the altar of this new religion, there was placed the Aryan race. It venerated the blood ties and the "*Führer"*, the German people's savior and the messiah of the Third Reich. These were all elements that made this political religion the most peculiar one in history. It encompassed all public life of its people in a complex tangle of rituals and symbols that were evoking the ancient myths of the Germanic religion blended with the myths of modern racist paganism (Gentile, 2006).

Nazism, much like fascism, did not overtly wage war against Christian churches. Its agenda claimed to support the freedom of Christian churches that posed no threat to the state's existence and until they were aligned with the moral values of the Germanic race. The regime also promoted a notion of "positive Christianity." Despite his deep contempt for Christianity, Adolf Hitler did not back those within his party who sought to launch a direct religious conflict against Christianity and Catholicism in favor of a purely Aryan and Germanic national religion. However, Nazism's approach to politics increasingly took on the characteristics of a new religion, which had been reshaped as an anti-Christian form of paganism (Gentile, 2006).

On the one side the United States as a civil religion, on the other Fascism and Nazism as political religions, these two extreme and opposite directions in examples of civil religions are crucial to observe to what extent the state can take control of the religion and aim even to convert the traditional values of religions to serve its political aims and gain greater authority.

The relationship between political power and religion reveals deep and complex patterns in how politicians seek legitimacy and authority in governing the masses. Since the earliest of times, religion has not only been a concept regarding the private sphere but also a tool for establishing order and control of the masses. Among the other classical authors who shaped the modern way of understanding of politics, such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the link between

religiosity and political power is also described by another classical author, Niccolò Machiavelli.

In Chapter XVIII of *The Prince* (2008), Machiavelli illustrates how princes can use religion as a means to strengthen their authority and maintain power over their subjects. He famously suggests that while a ruler should appear virtuous, when needed, he must be also willing to act immorally. He states that the prince should not necessarily possess all the good qualities which were enumerated across the various chapters of the book, but rather "seem" to have them. He states,

> *Therefore it is unnecessary for a prince to have all the good qualities I have enumerated, but it is very necessary to appear to have them. And I shall dare to say this also, that to have them and always to observe them is injurious, and that to appear to have them is useful; to appear merciful, faithful, humane, religious, upright, and to be so, but with a mind so framed that should you require not to be so, you may be able and know how to change to the opposite.*

Therefore, focusing on the connection between religion and governing, Machiavelli emphasizes that the prince, even though he is not religious, should act as he is. Religion is, therefore, a powerful tool that can be used as a political instrument, allowing governors to appear like an image of morality and divinity, even when their actions are pragmatic or contrary to the divine order. This reflects Machiavelli's broader view that political power often is not possessed by the owners of the real moral truth but by those who offer a perception of morality and righteousness.

In conclusion, despite it is unknown whether all the presidents of the United States who added the phrase "So help me, God" to their presidential oaths, totalitarian leaders of the Second World War who used religious symbols and rituals as a consolidation method for their regimes, contemporary leaders who often use religion in their speeches in public, are sincerely religious or not, they, without doubt, succeeded in "appearing religious", in a Machiavellian way.

Reconnecting the role of religion in contemporary politics to the concepts of chaos and cosmos as described by Mircea Eliade (1957), is evident that the politicians who are widely using religious rhetoric go further than merely borrowing these religious rhetorics; they transform the chaotic, undefined spaces in the politics

into sacred, creating a new artificial divine order where it is difficult to distinguish between what is purely religious and what is a mere instrument of political propaganda.

1.2. Political Nature of Religious Conflicts

The etymological origin of the word "nation" comes from the Latin word "*natio*," which means "birth", and consequently from the word "*nationem*", which means "breed" or "race". This etymological definition is a strong indicator of the ethnic origin of the concept of the nation (Gellner, 1983). Nationalism, which dominated the last centuries of world history, is based on an ethnic distinction of people, rather than religious distinction as before the emergence of the nation-states. However, nation-states are not homogeneous entities composed of one single ethnic group. In almost any country in the world, different nations coexist within a nation's borders. In 1971, in 39 out of 132 countries, the number of citizens belonging to the largest ethnic group within the country did not coincide with half of the country's population (Nielsson, 1985).

Hans Kohn (1944) distinguishes two types of nationalism, ethnic nationalism and civic nationalism. While the first one focuses irrationally more on culture and concentrates on an emotional connection to history, the second one is characterized by an idealized universalism, rationality and self-transcendence. He observed that civic nationalism was one of the characteristics of the Western world, while ethnic nationalism dominated the East.

Scott Appleby (2000) states that the ethnic groups seek to gain political autonomy, the "nationhood", to secure their distinctive culture and, in some cases, to fulfill what they regard as their "providential mission." In some cases, this mindset might have originated also from religious beliefs. When religion provides a sacralization to the quest for political autonomy, leaders driven by ethnic nationalism find a grounded justification for engaging in violent conflict against rival ethnic groups.

Mark Juergensmeyer (2017) in his famous book *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* concentrates on the religious justifications for violence, especially regarding Christianity and Islam. He underlines that for both

religions, one of the main and oldest ethical issues is whether it is permissible to use force and even violence on behalf of a righteous cause.

Regarding Christianity, the pacific Biblical passages such as “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” (Matthew 5:44) or “But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.” (Matthew 5:39) might seem in contrast with others such as “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10:34) and “Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.” (Luke 12:51). Still, Christianity until the 4th century when it became the official religion of the Roman Empire, largely upheld a pacifist stance. The development of the “just war theory” later emerged as a way for Christian theologians to address the moral questions surrounding the use of violence under specific conditions. The debates evolved as Christianity became integrated with political power. The just war theory continued to be one of the debated arguments of Christian understanding concerning the moral use of violence (Juergensmeyer, 2017).

On the other hand, regarding Islam, Juergensmeyer (2017) states that the teachings of Islam on violence are complex and context-dependent. He notes that while Islamic texts address violence, their interpretation can be ambiguous, particularly regarding who is considered a legitimate target of violence. The act of killing someone is addressed by the verses of Surah An-Nisa in the Quran (4:92 - 4:94). The verses emphasize the prohibition of killing a believer intentionally. However, there is no agreement on whether a believer is to be considered only a Muslim or also the “people of the book” (Jews and Christians), or even adherents of other faiths, which remains a subject of debate within Islamic theology (Juergensmeyer, 2017).

Regina Schwartz (1997) in her book *The Curse of Cain*, explores “the violent legacy of monotheism” by tracing the origins of violence to the process of identity formation, particularly the idea of forming an identity through the act of distinguishing themselves and separating from others by lining some boundaries. She argues that the Bible portrays and exemplifies “sibling rivalry”, suggested also by the name of her book, driven by competition for limited resources. Regina

Schwartz (1997) also notes that in many Biblical narratives, the symbolic act of substitutive sacrifice is often abandoned, resulting in the literal manifestation of violence. Therefore, the Holy Scriptures might indeed seem to be a ground, or even justification, for religious violence. However, it is crucial to note that violence, especially religious violence, is embedded in a multilayered context. Therefore, there is not a single cause or justification for violence. There are multiple factors leading to violent manifestations, as there is no religious movement driven "exclusively" by religious ideas (Appleby, 2000; 2015).

Regarding Islam, the etymological origins of the name "Islam" are rooted in the triconsonantal root of the Semitic languages "*s-l-m*", which constitutes the root of many words among them peace and security, much like its related Hebrew counterpart "*shalom*". Both terms convey a sense of social harmony and spiritual tranquility. While the Quran does address war and violence, it does so less frequently than the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, where the depictions of conflict tend to be more severe (Jenkins, 2012). However, Islam has been a political and military movement since its existence and its large discussion on the "world of conflict" (*dār al-ḥarb*), which refers to areas outside the Muslim world, where the use of violence is seen as a way to ensure cultural survival, Islam is being put as a religious justification and as a ground to many actual conflicts and terrorist movements. In this context, preserving the integrity of religious life is often considered a matter of *jihad*, the holy war (Juergensmeyer, 2017).

However, Juergensmeyer (2017) underlines the fact that Islam being associated with violence and terrorism is an accentuated fact after the 11 September 2001 Attacks. Prior to the hijacking of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, acts of terrorism carried out by Christian fundamentalists were already a serious global concern. Among the various terrorist attacks committed by Christians or driven by extremist Christian ideas in the United States, he cites the devastation of the Oklahoma City federal building in 1995, the bombing of the Atlanta Olympic Games in 1996, Christian militants involved in the shootings at a Jewish daycare center in California in 1999 and numerous abortion clinic attacks accompanied by murdering of the physicians practicing abortion. Additionally, terrorist attacks in Northern Ireland from the early 1960s to the end of the century

were also cited as an example of Christian terrorism. A more recent example was the case of Anders Breivik who in 2011 murdered by gunshot sixty-seven persons participating in a youth camp on an island near Oslo, Norway and eight more persons by a car combing attack, simultaneously. Therefore, it would be appropriate to state that religious, or in most cases ethnoreligious-driven terrorism is not an exclusive case of Islam. Indeed, alongside the terrorism by Christians, terrorist attacks committed by Jews, Hinduists, Sikhs and Buddhists are also widely discussed throughout his book.

Juergensmeyer (2017) emphasizes the concept of "cosmic war" led by religious extremists, driven by myths of a heroic history. These extremists are convinced that they are bringing out God's will and they view their military campaign as part of a larger, epic struggle between the good and the evil. This leads them to adopt a very different and often less rational approach to warfare than the conflicts led by secular idealists. They believe to be engaged in a metaphysical battle with goals far beyond the territorial or political goals, which in their view, justifies the enactment of continuous, intense and divine violence. They aim to lead the world toward what, for them, is the righteous way.

Scott Appleby (2015), criticizes Juergensmeyer's work as it oscillates superficially between accusing the religion itself to be authorizing the use of violence by religious actors and placing the blame on nationalist and ethnic figures who abuse religious sentiments, symbols and believers to serve distinctly non-religious ideals.

Scott Appleby (2015) distinguishes three types of religion: strong, weak and pathological. He defines "strong religion" as an interpretative approach focusing on how religions themselves can encourage or even justify violent acts based on the Holy Scriptures or the speeches of religious leaders. However, he underlines that few violent movements are "purely" religious in nature, even those categorized as the most religiously oriented terrorist networks such as al-Qaeda, Hezbollah or Gush Emunim. He states that most of these groups are composed of individuals from different realities, ranging from "true believers" to bureaucrats, armed militias, ideological supporters, displaced youth and opportunists. Therefore, it

would not be possible to state a movement or group solely driven by religion. Other factors and interests are often part of a broader power struggle.

In the aftermath of globalization, religious extremism has become the most common reaction of a disproportionately influential minority that feels threatened to vanish by the effects of globalization. Among the several forms of religious extremism that have emerged in the post-Cold War era, Scott Appleby (2000) cites "ethnoreligious chauvinism". This phenomenon often appears in societies where religious institutions are either suppressed or underdeveloped, and where religion's role as an independent cultural and social entity has been weakened due to neglect, oppression or a history of submission to a hostile state. It is in this suppressing environment that "weak religions", the term Appleby (2000; 2015) uses for religious communities that are consistently vulnerable to external manipulation, become ineffective at resisting the influence exercised by ethnic and ultranationalist movements that aim to exploit their symbolic and social capital. In these situations, ethnonationalist extremism merges with weak religion, forming a powerful alliance against outsiders. Therefore, the religious violence performed by these weak religions is where religion is a dependent variable, where the main cause of the violence originates from outside, such as actions carried out by the state or by nationalist or ethnic extremisms (Appleby, 2000).

Scott Appleby (2000) further discusses the "pathological religions", referring to religious actors who adopt fundamentalist or extremist practices and exhibit behaviors that are symptomatic of psycho-social deviance. In describing these three forms of religions, Scott Appleby (2000; 2015) emphasizes that there is no religious movement that demonstrates only characteristics of a single type of religion, whether strong, weak or pathological. There is always an oscillation between them, being that a religious movement might be both weak, strong or pathological in different periods.

In all these three forms of religion, there is always room for "a form of "false consciousness" and thus a resource for manipulation by political elites." (Omer et al., 2015). Both when religion is viewed as a secondary factor or when is considered as the real cause of religious violence, it is clear that religion itself remains a crucial variable in understanding violence. Societies exist within intersections of various

historical events, religious beliefs, social customs, political orientations and cultural frameworks that shape their motivations and commitments to different forms of violence and, potentially, also to peacebuilding and resistance. Therefore, in considering the case of religious violence, conflicts and extremisms, it is crucial to keep in mind the multifaceted dynamics behind them which might not have originated from purely religious beliefs.

While it is important to undermine the causes of religious violence and extremisms, it is crucial to analyze also the subject committing them. It would be erroneous to think that religious violence might be performed only by individuals or non-governmental actors. Indeed, Max Weber (1978) defines the modern state as "the association that claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence". A. Rashied Omar (2015) states that it is crucial to consider both state and non-state actors involved in religious violence and criticizes the work of Mark Juergensmeyer to deal exclusively with the violence of non-state actors. He states that considering only the non-state actors led to ignoring the dialogical nature of violence.

The central hypothesis of A. Rashied Omar's (2015) work is that reexamining the connection between religion and violence, particularly by incorporating the role of the state, will inevitably offer a new understanding of the relationship between these two concepts. He argues that the famous and widely debated duo composed of religion and violence must be broadened to form a triad that includes religion, violence and the state.

Among various examples regarding religious violence exercised by state actors, he cites the Apartheid regime that governed South Africa from 1948 to 1994 whose leaders were primarily adherents of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and its white supremacist policy included also the favoritism regarding the Calvinist Christianity. He illustrates also the religious violence and genocide exercised by Serbian and Croatian governments during the Bosnian War between 1992 and 1995 and as an example from Asia, he states the violence performed towards the Muslim community in Gujarat, India in 2002 (Omar, 2015).

As discussed in the previous part of this chapter, political leaders use religious rhetoric and concepts to legitimize their actions and increase their political authority. This usage might blur the lines between religiously motivated violence

and violence driven by political goals. The state, holding a monopoly on violence, might enforce religious ideologies through legal frameworks, military action or other forms of coercion, thereby perpetuating a cycle of violence that is both religious and political in nature (Omar, 2015).

Anthony Gill (2005) argues that politicians would provide support for a religious monopoly exclusively when it is in their interests while holding control of the masses. He argues that politicians have three major interests: political survival, maximizing government revenue alongside economic growth while minimizing civil unrest and minimizing the costs of ruling. A state-supported religion might be useful in accomplishing these interests by legitimizing and supporting the government.

In conclusion, the relationship between religion, politics and violence is complex and multifaceted. While religious texts and doctrines can be interpreted in such a way to justify violence, in fact religious violence often arises from a mixture of religious, political, ethnic and cultural factors where boundaries between them are often not clear. It is essential to consider the broader context in which religious violence and extremisms occur, including the role of state actors and the influence of ethnonationalist ideas. By acknowledging these complexities, efforts towards strategies for peacebuilding and conflict resolution might address the underlying causes, rather than focusing solely on religion as the only cause.

Lastly, as illustrated by the authors cited, religious violence is not an isolated phenomenon, nor it is attributed to adherents of any single faith or group. It is rather a manifestation of deeper societal issues combined, where religion serves as both a tool and a ground in struggles for power, identity and survival. Understanding this dynamic is key to having a comprehensive approach when addressing religious conflicts and promoting peacebuilding.

1.3. Religiosity as a Ground to Discrimination

Discrimination is an unjustified distinction between individuals based on their membership or perceived membership in a certain group or category. Discrimination and prejudice are two terms that go hand in hand as one of the main

reasons for discrimination is having a prejudice against someone or a group of individuals (Romei & Ruggieri, 2013).

Abrahamic religion's intolerance of each other is grounded in the belief that their religion is the righteous one and in the proselytic approach situated at the very center of their doctrine and their understanding of other religions, especially in the case of Christianity and Islam. Except for Judaism which is not a proselytic religion, other religious groups seek to bring others into their faiths and seek, at least ideally, to convert all individuals to their religion. Observing the reality in this context, any other religion is a potential enemy able to convert possible future adherents to their religion and, therefore, an obstacle to achieving the ultimate goal (Fox, 2016).

As discussed in the first chapter, within the Abrahamic religions, Islam considers some religions more acceptable than others. The doctrine regarding the "peoples of the book" are those who follow revelations that occurred before the Quran, which remain still legitimate but flawed (Stroumsa, 2015; Fox, 2016; Juergensmeyer, 2017). These religions are Christianity and Judaism, which are, as discussed earlier, not banned from Muslim society but are still subject to some restrictions. Heretical offshoots of Islam such as the Baha'i, according to most interpretations of Islam, are considered to be anathema and are not considered a "religion of the book" (Fox, 2016). Also, the Druze faith might be included among these religions. Historically, the situation regarding those apart from Christianity, Judaism and heretic offshoots of Islam have received an unsteady treatment as they were in some periods tolerated and in others persecuted (Fox, 2016).

Similar to Islam, also Judaism follows a doctrine that acknowledges that religions that follow the seven laws of Noah are not considered idolaters and are acceptable religions. Doctrines such as these that differentiate among the minority religions might lead to differential treatment of minority religions (Fox, 2016).

Before deepening into religious discrimination, it is useful to set the boundaries of this broad term. Jonathan Fox (2016) states the ambiguity in the usage of the terms "religious discrimination", "religious persecution", "religious intolerance" and "religious repression" which are often used as synonyms. However, each indicates different conditions threatening the survival of a religion and its adherents in an oppressive environment. Many other terms focus on the absence of such

oppression, such as “religious freedom”, “religious rights”, “religious tolerance”, “the free exercise of religion” and similar.

The difference between religious discrimination and religious persecution, intolerance and repression is that while religious discrimination stands for being treated differently due to one’s faith, other terms are about restricting one’s freedom to express themselves religiously. Religious discrimination, therefore, might occur also in conditions where there is no persecution against other religions (Fox, 2016). As an example of this case, it is possible to cite a hypothetical case of a Muslim woman wearing hijab and living in a state where she can freely live her religiosity but she gets rejected from her job offer applications when other candidates with similar characteristics who do not wear a religious accessory, or even, who wear an accessory related to the majority religion are preferred by the employer. While in this example there is no religious persecution, intolerance (at least not overtly) or repression there is indeed religious discrimination.

Religious discrimination can be expressed at two major levels: a macro level when the discriminatory acts are committed by the state and a micro level where the discriminatory acts occur between individuals (Akbaba, 2023). Religious discrimination at the state level occurs when the state restricts religious practices, clergy or institutions of minority religions, and does not put these restrictions on the majority religion. It is crucial to underline that when the state bans all religious practices regardless of a specific religion, it is not possible to address it as religious discrimination. For it to become a religious discrimination at the state level, either a religion or a group of religions among the others should be preferred by the state. When a certain religion is closely associated with the state it might lead to a situation where the government is more likely to discriminate against minority religions (Fox, 2016).

The most comprehensive and detailed worldwide analysis regarding religious discrimination at the state level is represented by the research made by Jonathan Fox (2016) where he analyzed 597 religious minorities in 177 countries from 1990 to 2008. His main finding was that religious discrimination is present and increasing in nearly all states, including Western countries. Additionally, he interestingly states that Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa have similar levels of religious

discrimination compared to Western countries. Asian countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Maldives and Pakistan have religious discrimination levels that are considerably lower than Western countries. Moreover, most of the Third World's Christian majority states are either similar to or even more tolerant than Western democracies. Notwithstanding, the research has demonstrated that religious discrimination, which is increasing almost anywhere in the world, is exercised mostly by the local and regional governments rather than the central government and continues to be a growing concern.

On the other hand, religious discrimination might also occur at the individual level. As will be further discussed in the third chapter regarding the field research, the "Social Identity Theory" states that individuals encode and decode information regarding the environment that surrounds them. They evaluate and categorize both objects and individuals. By doing so, they create groups that tend to discriminate toward each other, as they perceive the members of the other groups as outsiders (Tajfel, 1978; 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Therefore, individuals who identify themselves with the majority or favored religion might discriminate against other religions.

Religious discrimination, like other forms of discrimination, can manifest itself in various settings and in almost any aspect of everyday life, including the workplace, education, public spaces, healthcare and even family ties. As noted, it is rooted in prejudice against an individual's or a group's religious identity or their perceived adherence to a religious group. This bias can be direct, such as explicit exclusion or unequal treatment due to religious affiliation or indirect, where policies or practices disproportionately disadvantage certain religious groups. For example, workplace dress codes that prohibit religious symbols can indirectly target and disadvantage religiously observant individuals, as some religions require religious dress and accessories as a part of the faith.

The discriminatory acts might not always be overt. As it will be discussed further, they can be found in the "microaggression" form, which are those acts or wordings that can lead to discrimination even though the person who is committing discrimination might be unaware of the perception of their acts (Sue et al., 2007). A peculiar aspect of religious discrimination which puts it differently from other

forms of discrimination such as gender or age-based discrimination is that it can be perceived as a direct assault on an individual's belief system (Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007; Ysseldyk et al., 2010).

Whether it is manifested directly or indirectly, conscious or unconscious, religious discrimination is a social issue to be addressed properly. It deepens inequality within the society, promotes social division and harms social cohesion, as it prevents individuals from being fully a part of the society without fear of judgment, exclusion and isolation. It is crucial to underline that indirect or unconscious forms of discrimination, can be as harmful as direct and consciously made discrimination. Addressing religious discrimination requires a multilayered approach involving the state actors, including the implementation of stronger legal protection for religious groups, a proper educational system to promote religious tolerance and active efforts by organizations, associations and communities to create inclusive environments locally.

1.4. Other Forms of Discrimination

Discrimination occurs when an individual or a group of individuals are set apart from the favored group based on an unjustified distinction due to their membership or perceived membership in a certain group or category. This unjustified difference in treatment might occur based on any physical or cultural trait, such as gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion or political opinions (Romei & Ruggieri, 2013).

There are three main reasons behind discriminatory acts: prejudice, statistical thinking and unintentionality. While prejudice stands for unfairly or unreasonably created negative attitudes against an unfavored group, statistical thinking occurs when the lack of knowledge regarding the skills, productivity or the impact of an individual is compensated by a prior knowledge of the average performances of the group or category the individual belongs to (Romei & Ruggieri, 2013).

While the notion of prejudice is explained already throughout this research, an example of statistical thinking might be the tendency to not hire Roma people for a job vacancy because they are erroneously portrayed as "beggars, profiteers, criminals and lazy" (Sam Nariman, et al., 2020) in a situation where the Roma

applicant might have performed as equally as a non-Roma applicant. The third main reason behind discrimination, unintentional discrimination, occurs when the person committing discrimination is not aware of the effects of their acts and there are no malevolent decisions behind their preference, such as hiring young people over old, healthy over diversely abled or skinny over overweight (Romei & Ruggieri, 2013).

Despite religious discrimination being the focus of this research, it is crucial to acknowledge other forms of discrimination that may harm social cohesion by causing individuals to be set apart from the society in which they are embedded. Italy, as well as the European Union, ratified the principal legal instruments for combating discrimination by creating some groups whose rights are protected by law. Article 3 of the Italian Constitution states that everyone has equal social dignity and is treated equally under the law, without a distinction on gender, race, language, religion, political opinions and social or personal conditions (such as being with disabilities, socio-economic status, etc.). Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union brings a more comprehensive and specific approach to discrimination, including discrimination for non-political opinions and sexual orientation. In this section, these other forms of discrimination will be examined to understand better under which conditions they occur and how to prevent their reoccurrence.

Before deepening into each type of discrimination and the studies conducted on each of them, it is crucial to clarify important terms and concepts regarding discrimination. As discussed, discrimination might occur both directly and indirectly; intentionally or unintentionally. Additionally, the discrimination might be justified in some cases, such as the audition of a male actor for a male character in a film or requiring a degree in engineering for a position where the worker will use their skills obtained at the university. This situation is referred to as “objective justification”. In these cases, the discriminatory attitudes are accepted as they are justified by a reason. However, in some cases, there might be not a valid justification for treating a group differently. Such as practices of “tokenism”, where members of a minority group are granted benefits to falsely appear as inclusive to prevent accusations of discrimination. An example of tokenism might be hiring a colored worker in a company where almost all workers are white. “Revers

tokenism", which is a closely related term, refers to the cut of qualified benefits to the members of the favored group to give those benefits to less qualified members of the minority group (Romei & Ruggieri, 2013).

To give an example of tokenism in the context of the University of Padua and many other universities in Italy, it is possible to cite the case of the grant of a 20% increase in the regional scholarship to eligible female students enrolled in degrees regarding science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). This increase of 20% is granted to any female student enrolled in these degrees and already eligible for the regional scholarship, without requiring an additional qualification such as obtaining high grades or being economically more vulnerable (UniPD, 2024). This situation creates a disadvantage for male students enrolled in these degrees, where female students, despite having the same qualifications, are given an extra amount of scholarship for being members of a socially disadvantaged group.

"Reverse discrimination" and "favoritism" are also two closely related terms regarding discrimination. They both create situations where the non-members of protected groups are discriminated against. For example, reverse discrimination occurs when universities voluntarily implement admission policies that give preferential treatment to women and minority candidates (Lerner & Nagai, 2000). Similarly, favoritism consists of a positive unfair treatment of members of a specific group and is not an implicit consequence of the discrimination of other groups. For example, a politician can favor the group or district that they belong to (Kim, 2007).

Gender-based discrimination is one of the most debated types of discrimination. It refers to the unequal treatment or prejudice against individuals based on their gender identity or sexual orientation. It can be manifested in various settings such as the workplace, education and social life, where one gender identity or sexual orientation is systematically put in a disadvantaged position. Gender discrimination can bring fewer employment opportunities, lower wages and limited access to resources. Unfortunately, gender-based discrimination often disproportionately impacts women, but it might also affect men, as described by the previous example, and non-binary individuals in certain contexts.

An important qualitative research regarding gender-based discrimination in the university setting in Italy was conducted by the European project FREASCO, the acronym of "*Free from sexism and sexual harassment at school*" (EU Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme) which involved seven research institutes located in four European countries (Italy, Estonia, France and Greece), of which the University of Florence is the lead partner. In Italy, the research included focus groups composed of researchers, teaching and technical-administrative staff, scholarship holders, research fellows and PhD students from three Italian universities (the Universities of Florence, Bologna and Enna "Kore"), where many female participants and also male participants self-identifying as homosexuals confessed to having gone through unpleasant and inappropriate situations regarding their gender and sexual identity in the university setting (Biemmi, 2023).

Alongside the university, also the workplace where the wage gap between males and females continues to be an important dimension of gender-based discrimination. The data provided by Istat (2024) states that in 2021 the median value for gross wages per hour paid for the private sector in Italy (including any kind of work: executives, apprenticeship, white or blue collar) was 12,04 euros for males and 11,69 euros for females. While for individuals between 15 and 29 years old the gender gap was almost inexistent (10,42 euros for males and 10,30 euros for women), by increasing the age variable also the gap increased. For individuals being more than 50 years old the median value for males was 13,50 euros per hour, while females earned 11,87 euros per hour.

Sadly, the development of gender equality occurred only recently (Fredman, 1997). Until well into the 20th century, in almost any country women were legally subordinate to men in different ways, especially within the marriage law. The marriage constituted a legal obliteration of women's identity. The legal identity of a married woman was binged to her husband's, reducing her status almost as a legal minor (Fredman, 2011). While in the last decades many countries, especially in the West, adjusted their legislations to align with gender equality, the issue persists at the social level. The data provided by Istat (2024) gave important insights regarding gender equality in the household in Italy. In 2013, among couples with or without children (couples defined in this database as male and female), both aged 25 to 44

and working, men reported spending one hour per day on household tasks (such as washing dishes, cleaning and doing laundry), while women reported spending nearly three hours. In couples where only the man works, the distribution of household tasks shifted, with men spending just 36 minutes per day on these tasks, while women spend 5 hours and 2 minutes.

Ethnicity-based discrimination is another important type of discrimination. A study regarding ethnicity-based discrimination in the university setting was made by Guillermo-Wann and Johnston (2012) which used the data from the 2009-2010 Diverse Learning Environments survey piloted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA and included 4.984 university students from 14 institutions across the United States, 912 of which indicated two or more racial categories. Their results revealed that students identifying with two or more racial categories faced discrimination more often than those who identify solely as white, challenging the assumption that mixed-race students enjoy a "privileged" status as a result of the reverse discrimination phenomena described earlier. It is also shown that multiracial students with two minority backgrounds experienced discrimination at higher rates than those with one minority and one white background, suggesting that having some level of whiteness provided them a relative privilege.

No research focusing on ethnicity-based discrimination within a university setting in Italy was found in the literature by the time this thesis was written. The only report partly concerning this theme was the report titled "Inclusive University Manifesto" presented at the conference of the same name organized by Lumsa University in collaboration with the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and Ruiap and included only students who were all asylum-seekers. 46% of the participants expressed that they had felt discriminated against. Only a quarter of them stated that they have experienced discrimination within the university setting.

Despite having no research on ethnicity-based discrimination regarding the totality of university students in Italy, various research regarding the general population in Italy exist. Among them, the report provided by the European Union (2024) regarding the "Special Eurobarometer 535 Discrimination in the EU" survey held between April and May 2023, included 1.027 interviews held in Italy among 26.399 interviews held in total in 27 member states. Among the parameters, a

question asked the participants to express if they would feel comfortable, on a scale from 1 to 10, if a person belonging to each of the discriminated categories held the highest elective political office in Italy. 32% of the participants in Italy indicated that they would not be comfortable if this person holding the highest elective political office was a Roma person (EU mean is 26%), 19% indicated a transgender or intersex person (EU mean is 22%), 15% a homosexual person (EU mean is 16%) and 13% indicated a person belonging to a different ethnic origin (EU mean is 15%). Within the same survey, a similar question was asked this time as a colleague, instead of a politician. Again, 33% of the participants answered a Roma person would make them feel uncomfortable as a colleague (EU mean is 16%). Therefore, in the case of Italy, the discrimination against Roma people seems to surpass in strength the general form of discrimination based on ethnicity and the discrimination towards Roma people appears to be more evident compared to the other states of the European Union.

Other forms of discrimination, which are those based on age, language, opinions and social or personal conditions are also equally relevant and widely debated within the discrimination studies. While they are not dealt with as much as gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and religion-based discrimination, giving some examples of these dimensions of discrimination is still useful in understanding the discrimination as a whole.

Discrimination based on age, targets individuals at both ends of the age spectrum, marginalizing both the young and the elderly in various contexts. Among these contexts, the most relevant is the job market, where younger workers are often perceived as inexperienced and less capable, while older workers might face assumptions about being less productive or having outdated skills. Discrimination based on age might result in limitations to career advancement, unequal pay across different age groups or limited access to training opportunities.

Linguistic discrimination affects non-native speakers of the majority language of the country or speakers of minority languages within the country, often limiting their access to opportunities or services. An actual example of this kind of discrimination in Italy might be the forms to be filled in to request a residence

permit being exclusively in Italian, without even a handbook written in English or in French regarding how to fill in the forms.

Discrimination based on opinions, being both political and not, can manifest itself in the workplace, where these views may lead to exclusion or the loss of a job. Similarly, discrimination related to social or personal conditions, such as socio-economic status, being with disabilities or having a non-favored marital status, especially in Asian cultures where marriage is a central element of the society, might compound disadvantages faced by marginalized groups. These categories of discrimination, though less frequently discussed in the literature, remain critical to have a complete spectrum of inequality within society.

CHAPTER III – FIELD RESEARCH

1. Perception of Discrimination among Students of the University of Padua

The field research regarding the perceptions of discrimination among the students of the University of Padua aimed to measure to what extent and in which forms the students living in Padua and the province of Padua perceived discrimination in both general and religious forms. The research constituted the first research in Italy focusing on perceptions of religious discrimination among university students.

1.1. Theoretical framework

There are five propositions, grounded on the existent psychological and sociological theories, that altogether created the basis for this research on perceptions of religious discrimination among the students of the University of Padua.

Proposition 1: *People tend to identify themselves in groups and they are keen to discriminate towards other groups.*

This proposition is based on the "Social Identity Theory" that was first introduced by H. Tajfel (1978; 1979). H. Tajfel (1979) states that individuals prefer categories and schemes to encode and decode information. Similar to other objects and concepts, they categorize also other individuals and define them into groups. This helps to simplify their understanding of the world.

The theory was further developed by H. Tajfel and J. C. Turner (1979). They observed that putting into a category one group makes people discriminate against the other groups. The discriminated group is called the "out-group", while the favorited group is called the "in-group". The Social Identity Theory individuates three stages in discrimination. The first phase is the "social categorization" phase. The second phase is called "social identity" and it consists of individuals' self-understanding linked to their membership in social groups, alongside the values and emotional attributes that it brings. The third phase is "social comparison", which

consists of evaluating an individual's place within society by comparing it with other groups. The theory assumes that individuals not only categorize but also evaluate the categorized groups by attributing superiority or inferiority to them. It is assumed that the reason behind this group behavior showing solidarity within the in-group while discriminating against out-groups is the aim of achieving positive self-esteem and self-enhancement (Abrams & Hogg, 1990).

Proposition 2: *Belonging to a stigmatized group will lead to higher levels of perceived discrimination than those belonging to the non-stigmatized groups.*

This proposition is grounded on the "Stigma Theory" developed by Erving Goffman (1963), which defines stigma as an attribute that is deeply discrediting, reducing the individual "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one." The theory states that the possession of a stigma results in discrimination.

Goffman (1963) categorizes stigma into three types: "abominations of the body" which refers to physical deformities, "blemishes of individual character" such as mental disorder, imprisonment or addiction and "tribal stigma" consisting of one's race, nation and religion. He further explores how stigmatized individuals engage in strategies to manage their social identities. The first strategy is called "passing" and it happens when individuals hide their stigmatizing attributes to be mixed with others. The second strategy, instead, is "covering", a technique used to downplay a stigma during social interactions. For this technique, he gives the example of a blind person who makes an extra effort to gain motor proprieties to combat the "clumsiness" stereotype. The concept of "tribal stigma" is particularly relevant to the purposes of this research, as it encompasses inherited attributes that lead to social discrimination.

Proposition 3: *Discrimination is often not unidimensional. Being a member of multiple discriminated groups brings a more intense perception of discrimination.*

The third proposition for this research is linked to the "Theory of Intersectionality", first described by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). In studying

religious discrimination, it is crucial to underline that the individuals subject to religious discrimination might often be subject to other types of discrimination such as discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, physical conditions such as weight, height, scars and many others.

Crenshaw (1989) pointed out that African-American women were often marginalized in feminist theory (because they were African-American) and in antiracist policy discourse (because they were women). She addressed that they both predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often do not accurately reflect the impact of race (regarding feminist theory) and gender (regarding antiracist policies). She emphasized that the intersectional experience of being both an African-American and a woman aggravates the overall discrimination, which results in being superior to the single experiences of racism and sexism for people having only one discriminable condition.

Therefore, sociodemographic variables (age, gender and race) are also observed in this research on perceptions of religious discrimination among the students of the University of Padua to address the effects of intersectionality on religious discrimination. The acknowledgment of the fact that a student who belongs to multiple marginalized groups (for example, being from a religious minority and being a foreigner or having a non-binary gender identity) may perceive higher levels of discrimination helps to distinguish between the religious discrimination in its purest form from the type of discrimination who perceived as religious but that might be linked also to other dimensions.

Proposition 4: *The discriminatory acts might be found also in the form of microaggression.*

The discriminatory acts might be not always evident, as they can be hidden in everyday interactions and can be committed unconsciously. Regarding the manifestation of discrimination in everyday life, Derald Wing Sue et al. (2007) describe " racial microaggression" as brief and common verbal, behavioral or environmental offenses that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color. They underline that these acts can be both

intentional or unintentional. They observe microaggressions under three forms: microassault (often unconscious), microinsult (often conscious) and microinvalidation (often unconscious). Among the various examples of microaggression, they cite clutching the purse or checking the wallet as a person from the discriminated race approaches or passes, waiting to ride the next elevator when a person from the discriminated race is on it, a person from the discriminated race being mistaken for a worker at a store or even asking questions like "Where are you from?", "Where were you born?" or making compliments to the person from the discriminated race speaking the local language in a good manner (Sue et al., 2007). The Everyday Discrimination Scale developed by Williams et al., (1997), which was used in the first part of the survey used for this research, measured the frequency of such experiences of microaggression.

Proposition 5: *Individuals seek to give meaning to their interactions with other individuals, even if there is no actual meaning.*

Fritz Heider (1958), founder of the "Attribution Theory", suggests that the way that humans percept other humans is more complex than the way they percept objects. He states that individuals are perceived as "action centers" with the capability of benefitting or harming others intentionally. As they are equipped with abilities, wishes and sentiments; they can act purposefully, can perceive others and observe. He emphasizes the intentional nature of human acts, which lies at the core of his theory. He further analyzes that as people perceive each other when interacting, they also make sense of each other's behavior by referring to the "reasons behind the intention". Therefore, he states that individuals seek to understand the causes of events, just as causality occurs in nature it occurs also in personal interactions. The factors behind these interactions might be both internal or external.

Therefore, in studying perceived religious discrimination in this research, it is important to keep in mind that students may link their negative experiences to discrimination even though the actors of discriminatory events did not intend to commit discriminatory acts. As this study focuses on "perceptions" of

discrimination rather than “occurring” of discrimination, it is crucial to remember that individuals always seek to explain what they perceive. To avoid the effects of the study of “perceived” discrimination, an observational research method might be implemented in future research.

1.2. Research Questions, Alternative and Null Hypotheses

This research aims to address whether the students of the University of Padua perceive to be discriminated and, more specifically, to be discriminated against due to their religious beliefs. The two research questions for this research were formulated as:

RQ1: What are the levels and types of perceived general and religious discrimination among students at the University of Padua residing in Padua or the Province of Padua?

RQ2: How do these perceptions vary based on social and demographic factors such as age, citizenship, gender, ethnic background and religious belief?

Given the high percentage of foreigners residing in Italy, which is equivalent to 8,5 percent of the entire population in Italy as of January 2024 (Istat, 2024), it is crucial to study whether discriminatory acts occur frequently. Studying discrimination in all its kinds is therefore essential for fostering a pleasant and welcoming environment. Although conducting nationwide research may be challenging due to time and resource constraints, city-based studies focusing on a narrow target population such as university students could serve as a valid indicator of the broader situation.

There are 504.958 foreign nationals residing in the Veneto Region and 98.069 of them are residents in the province of Padua (Istat, 2024). However, as these numbers are only for those registered with the municipal registry offices (*Anagrafe*), the actual number of foreigners might be higher than these numbers. The University of Padua is one of the factors that lead foreign nationals to live in Padua, given that as of 31 July 2023, there are 6.567 foreign national students

enrolled at the University of Padua, which makes 9,6 percent of the total number of students enrolled for the 2022/2023 academic year (UniPD, 2024). Considering the rising trend in the number of foreign students enrolled at the University of Padua over the past years, the percentage for the 2023/2024 academic year is likely to be even higher.

Table 1 shows the ten most frequent countries of citizenship among the foreign national students enrolled for the 2022/2023 academic year.

Table 1. Top 10 countries of citizenship among the foreign national students enrolled for the 2022/2023 a.y. (UniPD, 2024).

	Citizenship	Total number of students
1	Iran	1094
2	Türkiye	549
3	Romania	460
4	China	356
5	Albania	320
6	India	266
7	Moldova	217
8	Cameroon	202
9	Russia	192
10	Pakistan	148

It is important to observe that none of these countries is predominantly Catholic Christian, except for Cameroon of which the major religious group is the Catholic Church, making up 33,1 percent of the total population as of 2022 (CIA, 2022). This multicultural environment created by the growing number of foreign students has made an optimal ground for research on perceived general and religious discrimination among the students.

Having a multidimensional approach focusing not only on the measurement of the perception of religious discrimination but also the general discrimination is useful to be able to compare students with a religious belief and those without. The data obtained on Istat (2024) regarding 2023, shows that 48 percent of the young adults in Italy, defined as those between 18 and 35 years old for this research, have declared to not attend a place of worship in 12 months prior to the survey. Therefore, given the great number of young adults who are not practicing their religion or do not have any religious belief, it was predicted that only a smaller amount of students was eligible to measure only religious discrimination.

Analyzing the discrimination towards foreign national students is particularly important since their arrival in Italy often consists of a major economic and emotional investment compared to the Italian students. They leave behind their family and friendship ties to develop new ones in a different cultural setting. Furthermore, they must also adapt to a different university setting on both educational and administrative sides. Additionally, they are economically more disadvantaged and more likely to face financial problems (Sherry et al., 2009). By the time most of them arrive in Padua without learning Italian, they are more likely to be set at the margins of daily life engagement. While these conditions are valid for almost any international student, an additional difficulty is set for those having a religious belief identifiable at first sight.

For this research, a deductive approach grounded on the Social Identity Theory, (Tajfel, 1978; 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the Stigma Theory (Goffman, 1963), the Theory of Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and the Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958) was used. Seven alternative (H_a) and null hypotheses (H_0) regarding the perception of general discrimination were formulated and listed as below.

H_{a1}: *Students who are not Italian citizens perceive higher levels of general discrimination than those who are Italian citizens.*

H_{01}: *There is no significant difference in the levels of perceived general discrimination between students who are Italian citizens and those who are not.*

H_{a2}: *Students who acquired Italian citizenship after birth perceive higher levels of general discrimination than those who are Italian citizens by birth.*

H_{02}: *There is no significant difference in the levels of perceived general discrimination between students who are Italian citizens and those who are not.*

The first two hypotheses are based on the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggesting that belonging to an out-group may increase the perception of discrimination. For the first hypothesis, the distinction is made between Italian citizens and non-Italian citizens; while for the second hypothesis, it is made for Italian citizens by birth and those who acquired Italian

citizenship after birth. These two hypotheses will be useful to see the variation in the perception of discrimination based on citizenship.

H_{a3}: *Female students perceive higher levels of general discrimination compared to male students.*

H_{03}: *There is no significant difference in the levels of perceived general discrimination between female and male students.*

H_{a4}: *Students with non-binary gender identities perceive higher levels of general discrimination compared to students with binary gender identities.*

H_{04}: *There is no significant difference in the levels of perceived general discrimination between students with non-binary gender identities and those with binary gender identities.*

Gender identity may influence how students perceive discrimination. Aligning with the Theory of Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), additional analysis regarding gender identity combined with other elements such as Italian citizenship and race are to be made to understand better the conditions that might aggravate the perception of discrimination.

H_{a5}: *The perception of general discrimination will differ across different ethnic groups.*

H_{05}: *The perception of general discrimination will be the same across different ethnic groups.*

As the Stigma Theory (Goffman, 1963) suggests, individuals might be stigmatized for their ethnicity and this may result in aggravating perception of discrimination. Additionally, the students belonging to a different ethnic group rather than Europeans might perceived as an out-group based on the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

H_{a6}: *The perceptions of discrimination (both general and religious) will change across different levels of study.*

H_{06}: *The perceptions of discrimination (both general and religious) will remain the same across different levels of study.*

It is important to analyze how the perception of discrimination varies across different levels of education. Given the cultural and personal gain that higher levels of education bring, a higher level of education might bring a lower perception of discrimination. However, this hypothesis is closely linked also to another crucial variable, which is the age of the students. Additional analysis of whether the perception of general discrimination changes in different age groups will be made.

H_{a7}: *The longer a student has lived in Padua and in the province of Padua, the lower their perceived levels of discrimination (both general and religious).*

H_{07}: *There is no significant relationship between the length of time a student has lived in Padua and in the province of Padua and their perceived levels of discrimination (both general and religious).*

Relocating to a new city or even a new country for educational purposes is not the easiest task both emotionally, economically and physically. Various problems that students face upon their arrival such as housing, complex bureaucratic processes, adjusting to new cultural norms and language barriers, especially for international students, can make the transition overwhelming. Therefore, it is most likely that students would perceive higher discrimination at the early stages of their stay in Padua, based on the Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958).

For the perception of religious discrimination, instead, seven additional hypotheses were identified.

H_{a8}: *Students with religious beliefs perceive higher levels of general discrimination than those without religious beliefs.*

H_{08}: *There is no significant difference in the levels of perceived general discrimination between students with religious beliefs and those without religious beliefs.*

Students who identify themselves with a religion may be more vulnerable to discriminatory acts, based on the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

H_{a9}: *Catholic Christian students perceive lower levels of religious discrimination compared to students confessing other beliefs.*

H_{09}: *There is no significant difference in the levels of perceived religious discrimination between Catholic Christian students and students confessing other beliefs.*

$H_{a9\text{-}bis}$: *Muslim students perceive higher levels of religious discrimination compared to students confessing other beliefs.*

$H_{09\text{-}bis}$: *There is no significant difference in the levels of perceived religious discrimination between Muslim students and students confessing other beliefs.*

As Italy is characterized by a majority Catholic Christian population, it is possible that students confessing other beliefs would perceive higher levels of discrimination based on the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Additionally, since Islam is the second religion with the most believers in Italy and given the rising phenomena of Islamophobia in Italy (Sciortino, 2002; Guolo, 2003) which was fueled by international events such as the 9/11 attacks (Allievi, 2014) and various terrorist attacks held place in European capitals within the last two decades, it is most likely that Muslim students perceive a higher level of religious discrimination compared to other students.

H_{a10}: *Among students with religious beliefs, those who wear religious clothing or accessories perceive different levels of religious discrimination compared to those who do not.*

H_{010}: *There is no significant difference in the levels of perceived religious discrimination between students with religious beliefs who wear religious clothing or accessories and those who do not.*

Wearing religious clothing or accessories results in being a marker of identity, thus it might cause individuals to be more vulnerable to religious discrimination, based on the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Additionally, students wearing religious clothing or accessories might be more susceptible to religious discrimination and, based on the Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958), might be more likely to perceive religious discrimination even when there is not.

H_{a11}: *Christian Orthodox students report increased levels of discrimination (both general and religious) following the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War.*

H_{011}: *There is no significant increase in levels of perceived discrimination (general or religious) reported by Christian Orthodox students following the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War.*

H_{a12}: *Jewish students report increased levels of discrimination (both general and religious) following the escalation of the Israel-Hamas War.*

H_{012}: *There is no significant increase in levels of perceived discrimination (general or religious) reported by Jewish students following the escalation of the Israel-Hamas War.*

Based on the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), political conflicts and events concerning the international public can exacerbate biases and increase discriminatory acts toward individuals connected to these conflicts, by creating an "us" versus "them" mentality. The intensified media

coverage and public discourse surrounding international conflicts can aggravate existing prejudices, resulting in a more hostile environment for these students. Moreover, as the Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958) suggests, individuals concerned with these conflicts might be keener to perceive discrimination even when it is non-existent, subtle or unintended.

H_{a13}: *The perception of religious discrimination will not be the same across the various ethnic groups.*

H_{013}: *The perception of religious discrimination will be the same across the various ethnic groups.*

This last hypothesis is grounded on the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958) and specifically the Theory of Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), as a student who is part of a religion and a discriminated ethnic group might have an aggravated perception of discrimination.

1.3. Methodology

The field research on the perception of religious discrimination among students of the University of Padua who reside in Padua or the Province of Padua consisted of a self-assisted computer-based survey. The inclusion criteria for the research were being a student enrolled at either a Bachelor's, Master's, One-cycle Master's, PhD course or being an international exchange student or a double-degree student, being at least 18 years old and residing in Padua or the Province of Padua.

First, initial questions on respondents' status regarding Italian citizenship, gender, age, ethnic background, type of studies and the duration of the respondent's stay in Padua were asked. These questions helped to capture participants' attributes. Successively, all respondents that fit into the inclusion criteria were directed to the questions of the Everyday Discrimination Scale created by Williams et al. (1997), which was used to measure perceived discrimination in its general form. Consequently, only the candidates with a religious belief were directed to the questions of the Religious Discrimination Scale developed by Allen et al. (2018).

This double-layered approach helped to capture the level of perceived general discrimination level of both students with and without a religious belief and, successively for those students with a religious belief, to measure the discrimination linked only to religious beliefs. In this manner, other forms of discrimination not caused by religious beliefs were identified to achieve non-biased results. This approach also gave the possibility to compare the general level of discrimination for students with religious beliefs and those without.

The data collection period went from 18.05.2024 until 11.07.2024 with the participation of 668 respondents. All information gathered has been used only for research purposes in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (Regulation EU 2016/679). Due to the constraints in reaching a full list of students residing in Padua or the Province of Padua, probability sampling methods were not accessible. Instead, a voluntary response sampling method was used to reach the respondents. Therefore, unfortunately, the data collected is not aimed to be representative of the entire population of students of the University of Padua who reside in Padua or the Province of Padua. However, a great predictability of the sample universe is still aimed as the main goal of this research.

To collect the data, initially, a Google Forms link containing the survey was provided to the respondents by using various student WhatsApp groups and mailing lists. Successively, flyers containing the QR code of the survey link were put on the notice boards of all departments situated in the city center and the same flyers were also distributed to the students randomly in libraries and study rooms. Only students who voluntarily adhered to the survey were included in the research. The possibility of a self-selection bias that might be caused by the voluntary response sampling method is discussed in the "1.5. Limitations and Further Research" section.

As of 31 July 2023, 68.701 students are enrolled at the University of Padua for the 2022/2023 academic year. 17.989 of them are officially resident in the Province of Padua. However, off-site students from Italy and international students do not often change their official residency address either to avoid complex processes or because their landlords do not allow them to do so. To reach the total number of students living in the province of Padua, an approximation was made. It is possible to think that students officially residing outside the Veneto Region, 18.047 students

in total, are more likely to get housing in the Province of Padua without officially registering their address. This number includes also 3.439 students who are foreign nationals residing abroad. Therefore, by summing the number of students who officially registered their address in the Province of Padua and those residing outside the Veneto Region, we can approximate the number of students who are living in the Province of Padua, which makes 36.036 students (UniPD, 2024). Considering the national data obtained on Istat (2024) which showed that 52 percent of the young adults aged between 18 and 35 years old have declared to attend a place of worship 12 months prior to the survey, it is possible to expect that 17.738 of these students will be practicing a religion, which will make them eligible to participate in the second part of the survey concerning religious discrimination.

The data collection period was aimed to be terminated when it reached the calculated sample size prior to the research by using the confidence interval method using the sample size formula for finite populations, as described below, for both the number of students ideally residing in the Province of Padua (36.036 students, named Population 1 or N_1) and the number of students ideally residing in the Province of Padua and practice a religious belief (17.738 students, named Population 2 or N_2).

Sample Size (n) Formula for Finite Populations:

$$n = \frac{[Z^2 \times p \times (1 - p) \times N]}{[E^2 \times (N - 1) + Z^2 \times p \times (1 - p)]}$$

Population 1 (N_1): 36.036 students

Population 2 (N_2): 17.738 students

Confidence Level: 95% (Z-score = 1,96)

Estimated Proportion (p): 0,5

Margin of Error (E): 0,05

Ideal sample size for Population 1 (n_1):

n_1 = 34.553,76 / 91,0479 ≈ 380 students

Ideal sample size for Population 2 (n_2):

n_2 = 17.034,31⁄45,3029 ≈ 376 students

Non-eligible candidates were excluded from the research right after the initial questions, without having access to the Everyday Discrimination Scale (Williams et al., 1997). After having carefully cleaned the answers to the initial questions given by these individuals either did not authorize the data treatment or did not fit into the research criteria due to not having a relationship with the University of Padua or not residing in Padua or the Province of Padua, the final sample included 589 respondents who answered to the questions of the Everyday Discrimination Scale. Among them, 267 students were identified as eligible to participate also in the second part of the survey containing the Religious Discrimination Scale (Allen et al., 2018). Since it was difficult to reach students with a religious belief, the research could not be concluded by the time it reached the preestablished ideal sample size for the students either with or without a religious belief (Population 1, $n_1 \approx$ 380 students). This caused an increasing number of students to be included in the research. However, after nearly two months of data collection, reaching the pre-established sample size of students with a religious belief ($n_2 \approx$ 376 students) was still not possible. Therefore, the data collection period was concluded to avoid time-related bias on the sample. Using the same formula, the actual margin of error for both populations was calculated as approximately 4,01% for Population 1 (n_1) and 5,96% for Population 2 (n_2).

Therefore, I will be 95% confident that the true representation of the responses that all 36.036 students who are living in Padua or the Province of Padua would give lies within ±4,01% of the proportion that I will observe by analyzing my sample. Similarly, this amount will be ±5,96% for 17.738 students who are living in Padua or the Province of Padua and practicing a religion.

The first question before starting the survey asked for authorization for the treatment of the respondents' sensible data for research purposes, as stated in the privacy policy statement for this research which was made available both in

English and Italian. Only respondents who gave this authorization were moved further.

The following initial questions of the survey aiming to capture respondents' attributes regarding Italian citizenship, gender, age, ethnic background, degree of study and the period of stay in Padua, alongside the last two questions regarding the wars between Russia-Ukraine and Hamas-Israel were formulated by following the guidelines described by Piergiorgio Corbetta (2003). Specifically, the questions were crafted to be as concise and straightforward as possible, adhering to his recommendation for simplicity. Another key principle followed was clarity, ensuring that the questions were both precise and easy to understand. Particular attention was given to making them inclusive and not leading to biases that would alter the respondent's opinions. Lastly, the questions were constructed to meet the criteria of comprehensiveness and mutual exclusivity, ensuring that all relevant aspects were covered without overlap.

The survey's first question was "Are you an Italian citizen?" (No=0; Yes, by birth=1; Yes, obtained after birth=2) which helped address the participant's immigrant background and generate a nominal variable regarding Italian citizenship. Table 2 shows the distribution of the answers regarding this question.

Table 2. Italian citizenship

	Frequency	**%**
No	226	38,4%
Yes, by birth	342	58,1%
Yes, obtained after birth	21	3,6%
Total	589	100,0%

As stated earlier, the University of Padua, as of 31 July 2023, has 9,6% students with a foreign nationality, which is way lower than the 38,4% (226 respondents) that they represent in this sample. Therefore, the foreign nationals are overrepresented. This overrepresentation will be fixed during the data analysis phase and this issue will be also discussed in the "1.5. Limitations and Further Research" section. As expected, 342 respondents are Italian citizens by birth

(38,4%) which makes the majority. Only 21 respondents acquired their citizenship after birth (3,6%), which indicates a less recent immigrant background.

The second question, "Which one fits you better?" (Male=0; Female=1; Others=2; Prefer not to say=3), was indicated to elicit the sexual identity of the participants and to create a nominal variable on gender identity. Table 3 shows the answers regarding gender identity.

Table 3. Gender

	Frequency	**%**
Male	207	35,1%
Female	362	61,5%
Others	12	2,0%
Prefer not to say	8	1,4%
Total	589	100,0%

The University of Padua, as of 31 July 2023, has 37.502 female students, which makes 54,58% of total students. Despite there being an overrepresentation of females in this sample, as they represent 61,5% (362 respondents) of the total cases, the data collected is great enough to be robust against producing biased results. While 35,1% (207 respondents) of the respondents identify themselves with the male gender, 2% (12 respondents) of them identify themselves with non-binary gender identities, alongside the 1,4% (8 respondents) who prefer not to state their gender identity.

The third question, "How old are you?" (18-21=0; 22-25=1; 26-29=2; 30 and above=3), helped in visualizing the age distribution of the participants and creating an ordinal variable based on the age of respondents. Table 4 shows the distribution of answers regarding the age variable.

Table 4. Age

	Frequency	**%**
18-21	128	21,7%
22-25	273	46,3%
26-29	134	22,8%
30 and above	54	9,2%
Total	589	100%

The University of Padua did not disclose the age distribution of its students. Therefore, it was not possible to compare the age distribution of the sample with the actual distribution. In this sample, 21,7% (128 respondents) have declared to be between 18-21 years old, 46,3% (273 respondents) to be between 22-25 years old, 22,8% (134 respondents) to be between 26-29 years old and, finally, 9,2% (54 respondents) declared to be 30 or more years old.

The fourth question, "What is your ethnic background?" (White/European=1; Middle Eastern/North African=2; Sub-Saharan African=3; Asian=4; Native American=5; Latin American=6; Multiracial=7; Others=8), helped to identify the ethnic background of the participants and to create a nominal variable based on ethnicity. Table 5 shows the ethnicity distribution of respondents.

Table 5. Ethnicity

	Frequency	**%**
White/European	397	67,4%
Middle Eastern/North African	65	11,0%
Sub-Saharan African	15	2,5%
Asian	54	9,2%
Latin American	18	3,1%
Multiracial	19	3,2%
Others	21	3,6%
Total	589	100%

The University of Padua did not disclose any information regarding the ethnicity of its students, therefore it was not possible to compare this sample's ethnicity proportions to the actual ones. 67,4% of the respondents (397 respondents) identified themselves as "White/European", as expected since the research is conducted in a European state. 11% of them (65 respondents) declared to be "Middle Eastern/North African", which indicates most likely a Muslim background. 9,2% of them (54 respondents) declared themselves to be "Asian". 3,1% of the respondents (18 respondents) declared to be "Latin American" and only 2,5% of them (15 respondents) to be "Sub-Saharan African". None of the respondents identified themselves as "Native American", as it would be a rare

situation in a research context in Italy. The pre-established categories such as "Asian", "European" or "Sub-Saharan African" might be broad, leading to an oversimplification of the cultural and religious varieties within these areas, as will be discussed in "1.5. Limitations and Further Research" section.

It is important to notice that 3,2% of the respondents (19 respondents) identified themselves as "Multiracial" and 3,6% (21 respondents) chose the "Others" category, which leads to an additional question for further clarifications where the possibility to freely enter a text was given. The answers given to the following question were as stated in Table 6 below.

Table 6. Other ethnic backgrounds explained

N. of respondents	Ethnic background explained
11	Turkish
2	Turkic
2	Indian
1	Central Asian
1	South Asian
1	Eastern European
1	African-Portuguese and Italian
1	Berber
1	Not classifiable

This question on ethnic background was one of the most complex questions to develop to address better the research purposes. Since the question tries to identify whether the student has a phenotype that is easily identifiable as a foreigner in Italy, it was chosen not to use a country list among which to select the country of citizenship. This choice was made since the country of citizenship might not coincide with the phenotype of a person, due to an immigrant background that relates to two or more generations back, where it is most likely that the citizenship of the country of immigration was acquired.

However, as it will be discussed in the "1.5. Limitations and Further Research" section, the possible answers that were given were revealed to lead to some confusion, especially among Turkish students. Türkiye's unique situation characterized by the difficulty in identifying whether its inhabitants are European, Middle Eastern or even Asian was identified before the formulation of the question.

Also Eastern European respondents were foreseen to be subject to this kind of confusion in the classification. The problems relating the ethnic categorization in research are already a debated issue among various scholars (Hunt & Megyesi, 2008; Unger, et al., 2012; Yao, et al., 2021). However, since ethnicity is a measure of self-affiliation (Yao, et al., 2021), the respondents' own perspectives regarding the group of ethnicity with which they identify themselves was useful for this research. Therefore, individuals originating from the contested areas were leaved to asses their own ethnic group whenever it could fit into the categories that were given, otherwise, they could indicate it in the form of free text later.

The respondents identifying themselves as "Turkish" (more likely to be linked to the inhabitants of Türkiye) and "Turkic" (more likely to be linked to the general term for a greater area characterized by the usage of Turkic languages) constitute 13 out of 21 responses that were given. This situation might also be caused by the origins of the researcher's revealed by her name which was made public at the beginning of the survey. A desire to make themselves visible to the researcher, as they share a similar heritage, is easily understandable. This issue will be further discussed within the "1.5. Limitations and Further Research" section.

As for other answers, "Indian", "South Asian" and "Central Asian" are still within Asia and "Eastern Europe" is still part of Europe, therefore there was no need to specify the area. The answer "African-Portuguese and Italian" would make part of the "Multiracial" category. While "Berber" would be part of the "Middle Eastern/North African" category, it is still important considering the emphasis that the respondent wanted to give about their ethnical heritage.

The answers given were recoded only for the testing of hypotheses n. 5 and 13 as stated below:

- "Turkish" recoded as "White/European",
- "Turkic" recoded as "Asian",
- "Indian", "Central Asian" and "South Asian" recoded as "Asian",
- "Eastern European" recoded as "White/European",
- "African-Portuguese and Italian" recoded as "Multiracial",
- "Berber" recoded as "Middle Eastern/North African",

- "Not classifiable" was not included only in the testing of hypotheses n. 5 and 13.

The fifth question, "What is your relationship with the University of Padua?" (No relationship=0; BA=1; MA=2; Single-cycle MA=3, PhD=4; Erasmus=5; Double-degree=6; Other=7), served as an indicator of the course of study or the international exchange program in which the students are taking part. This question helped to create a nominal variable based on the student's relationship with the University of Padua. The distribution of answers regarding this variable is reported in Table 7.

Table 7. Relationship with the University of Padova

	Frequency	**%**
BA	182	30,9%
MA	260	44,1%
One-cycle MA	26	4,4%
PhD	88	14,9%
Erasmus	19	3,2%
Double degree	7	1,2%
Other	7	1,2%
Total	589	100%

The University of Padua has disclosed that there are 41.364 students (59,21% of the total) enrolled in a Bachelor's degree (BA) as of 31 July 2024. Similarly, it was disclosed that 19.265 students (27,58% of the total) were enrolled in a Master's degree (MA) and 9.222 (13,2% of the total) were enrolled in a Single-cycle Master's Degree. It was not possible to obtain any information regarding the PhD students' distribution.

The majority of the respondents, 44,1% (260 respondents), are enrolled in a Master's degree (MA). This group is followed by 30,9% of the respondents (182 respondents) who are enrolled in a Bachelor's degree (BA). 14,9% of the respondents (88 respondents) are doing a PhD, while 4,4% of the respondents (26 respondents) are enrolled in a Single-cycle Master's Degree. 3,2% (19 respondents) of the respondents answered that they are in the province of Padua as part of the

Erasmus+ Exchange Programme and 1,2% (7 respondents) of the respondents are enrolled to double-degree programs in which the University of Padua is participating. 1,2% (7 respondents) indicated to be part of the "Other" category that was put to cover any other program or peculiar situations that may occur (for example, 1st and 2nd level Professional Master's programs, Specialization Schools etc.). In this sample, there is an overrepresentation of the students enrolled in a Master's Degree and a lower representation of those enrolled in a Bachelor's and in a Single-cycle Master's Degree. One of the possible causes for this overrepresentation migth be the researcher's affinity to the Master's Degree students which causes an ease in approaching for the participation in the survey. Another possible cause might be the greater awareness of the Master's Degree students towards research, as they already developed thesis research for their prior degree if completed in Italy. This issue will be further addressed in the "1.5. Limitations and Further Research" section.

The sixth question, "For how long have you been living in Padua (including also the province)?" (Don't live in Padua=0; Up to 6 months=1; 6-12 months=2; More than a year=3), helped in identifying how much of the discriminatory acts might have happened in Padua or the Province of Padua. The distribution of answers regarding this question is reported in Table 8 below. To control the place of occurrence of the discriminatory acts, only students living in Padua or the province of Padua were admitted to the research. In addition, students were asked to consider only events that happened within the past year or by the time of their arrival in Padua. This helped to achieve results that were intended to be greatly not contaminated by discriminatory acts that occurred outside the province of Padua.

Table 8. Living in Padua

	Frequency	**%**
Up to 6 months	33	5,6%
6-12 months	99	16,8%
More than a year	457	77,6%
Total	589	100%

The University of Padua did not disclose any information on this specific context. Therefore, it was not possible to compare the sample to the actual distribution. In this sample, 77,6% of the respondents (457 respondents) declared to living in Padua or the province of Padua for more than a year. 16,8% (99 respondents), instead, declared that they have been started to live in the area only between 6-12 months before. 5,6% of the respondents (33 respondents) stated that they had been living in the area for less than six months. Despite later in the survey the respondents were asked to indicate only the events that happened to them by the time they arrived in Padua and the province of Padua, there is still room for answers that would lead to discriminatory acts that occurred somewhere else, due to the participant burden. Additionally, as described earlier, the Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958), having just moved from another city or country might aggravate the perception of discrimination. Therefore, to mitigate these possible issues, separate analyses are to be done with these three groups of students.

The following questions were taken from the Everyday Discrimination Survey developed by Williams et al. (1997) and have been widely used as a valid and reliable (Taylor et al., 2004; Krieger et al., 2005) measure of subjective daily experiences of discrimination. The questions were reported without any variation, except for the first question which originally was developed as "You are treated with less courtesy than other people are." and, instead, it is reported as " You receive less courtesy than other people do." for this research. This change was due to concerns caused by the lack of clarity that was revealed during the initial phases of the creation of this survey. The original version of the Everyday Discrimination Scale containing nine questions was used in this research. The questions are listed below.

1. You receive less courtesy than other people do.
2. You are treated with less respect than other people are.
3. You receive poorer service than other people at restaurants or stores.
4. People act as if they think you are not smart.
5. People act as if they are afraid of you.
6. People act as if they think you are dishonest.

7. People act as if they're better than you are.
8. You are called names or insulted.
9. You are threatened or harassed.

Suggested possible responses were used without making any changes. The possible responses were: almost every day, at least once a week, a few times a month, a few times a year, less than once a year and never.

Eli Michaels et al. (2018) state that there are two most common approaches in coding the Everyday Discrimination Scale. The first approach is situation-based coding where each survey item is dichotomized as "never=0" and "ever=1". This approach would lead to an oversimplified situation and an unnecessary loss of data, since the experience lived by those who respond "less than once in a year" is not in any case similar to the experience of those who respond "almost every day".

The second approach is frequency-based coding where each response is given a value according to the Likert scale from "never=1" to "almost everyday=6". However, also this coding approach is not fully representative of the experience since the differences between the responses are not guaranteed to be identical. While "less than once a year" is situated somewhere between never and only once a year, "a few times a year" is already situated somewhere between 2-3 times a year, which would make up to three times. Similarly, "a few times a month" is way more than "a few times a year". Assuming that the distance between these items is identical would not be logical. This is a well-known and debated issue regarding the ordinal variables in social science research (Corbetta, 2003). Given these limitations, a different coding approach that takes into account the actual reoccurrence of discriminatory acts was necessary to be implemented.

Eli Michaels et al. (2018) underlined that both approaches underestimated the chronicity of discrimination experiences and alongside these two approaches they used a third one in their analysis, the chronicity-based coding. They coded the answers according to the total number of reported discrimination experiences, standardized on the total number of days per year. The coding according to this approach is as follows:

"Never" is coded as 0.

"Less than once a year" is coded as the midpoint between 0 and 1 time per year, which equates to 0.5×/year.

"A few times a year" is coded as 3. As it is generally interpreted as 2-4, therefore the midpoint was selected.

"A few times a month" is coded as 3×12 months=36×/year.

"At least once a week" is coded as 2×52 weeks=104×/year.

"Almost every day" is coded as 5×52 weeks=260×/year.

In this research, this chronicity-based coding approach was used. Later in the data analysis section, the coded items are to be summed to represent the total number of daily discrimination experiences annually, creating a score ranging between 0 and 2340, which is later normalized as a value between 0-100. By doing so, the distances between the answers became clearer. While the single variables that were created from the answers to each question were ordinal, once the answers were summed it was possible to create a ratio scale dummy variable measuring the Everyday Discrimination Score. Thus, this process transformed the ordinal data into a more nuanced measure, allowing for more advanced statistical analyses that would not be possible to conduct with purely ordinal data.

Once the Everyday Discrimination Scale was completed, the next question in the survey was regarding religious belief. The respondents were asked to choose between Christianity (coded=1), Islam (=2), Judaism (=3), Hinduism (=4), Buddhism (=5), Others (=6), "Prefer not to say" (=7) and "I do not believe in any religion" (=0). The distribution of the answers regarding the respondent's religious beliefs is reported in Table 9 below.

Table 9. Religion

	Frequency	%
No religion	323	54,8%
Christianity	164	27,8%
Islam	52	8,8%
Judaism	7	1,2%
Hinduism	7	1,2%
Buddhism	3	0,5%
Others	11	1,9%
Prefer not to say	22	3,7%
Total	589	100%

The University of Padua did not disclose any information regarding the religious affinity of its students, therefore there was no possibility to compare the distribution to the actual one. However, as discussed earlier, a high percentage (48%) of young adults (18-35 years old) in Italy did not visit a worship place within the past 12 months in 2023. Even though this percentage obtained from Istat (2024) did not measure religious affiliation but only the reoccurrence of visiting a worship place, it was still predictable that many students of the University of Padua would not have a religious belief.

Indeed, 54,8% (323 respondents) declared not to believe in any religion. Since they would not be eligible to be included in the following sections of this survey, after this question they were addressed directly to the last two questions regarding the wars between Russia-Ukraine and Hamas-Israel. 27,8% (164 respondents) declared to be of the Christian faith. 8,8% (52 respondents) are Muslim. 1,2% (7 respondents) are Jewish, as well as the Hinduists. Only 0,5% (3 respondents) are Buddhists. On the other hand, 1,9% (11 respondents) stated that they have other religious beliefs and 3,7% (22 respondents) preferred to not to state their religious beliefs. A great number of students keeping their religious beliefs private is an interesting fact to be analyzed within the data analysis section.

Since this research is focused on Abrahamic religions, respondents who believed in Christianity, Islam and Judaism were asked to specify their branch within the specific questions tailored for each group, which appeared only to them. The frequency tables of these three groups are shown below. The respondents with

faiths other than these three religions were directed to the question regarding the religious dress or accessories.

Respondents having Christian faith were asked to choose their religious branch between Catholic (=1), Orthodox (=2), Protestant (=3) and Others (=4). The distribution of Christian denominations within the sample is stated in Table 10.

Table 10. Christian groups

	Frequency	%
Catholic	140	85,4%
Orthodox	12	7,3%
Protestant	9	5,5%
Others	3	1,8%
Total	164	100%

As foreseen, 85,4% of the Christians (140 respondents) of them are Catholic, followed by 7,3% (12 respondents) of Orthodox Christianity, 5,5% (9 respondents) of Protestantism and only 3% (3 respondents) identify themselves with other branches of Christianity.

Respondents identifying with the Muslim faith were asked to choose their religious branch between Sunni (=1), Shia (=2), Alawi (=3), Quranist (=4) and Others (=5). The distribution of Muslim branches for this sample is reported in Table 11.

Table 11. Muslim groups

	Frequency	%
Sunni	39	75%
Shia	6	11,5%
Alawi	2	3,8%
Quranist	3	5,8%
Others	2	3,8%
Total	52	100%

As it is globally the major branch of Islam, the majority, 75% (39 respondents), identify themselves as Sunni Muslims. This is followed by 11,5% (6 respondents) identifying as Shia, while 5,8% (3 respondents) identify as Quranist Muslims.

Additionally, 3,8% (2 respondents) identify as Alawi, as well as those belonging to other branches of Islam.

Respondents affiliated with Judaism were asked to choose their religious branch between Orthodox (=1), Reformist (=2) and Others (=3). The distribution of Jewish branches is stated in Table 12.

Table 12. Jewish groups

	Frequency	%
Reformist	4	57,1%
Others	3	42,9%
Total	7	100%

Among the respondents, there was only a small amount of respondents identifying with Judaism, which may cause a limitation in performing different kinds of analysis, as will be discussed in the "1.5. Limitations and Further Research" section. Still, 57,1% (4 respondents) identify as Reformist Jews, while 42,9% (3 respondents) belong to other branches of Judaism. No respondent was identifying with Orthodox Judaism.

The following question, "Do you wear clothes or accessories that are linked to a specific religion?" was directed to all respondents with any kind of religious belief, which were 266 students in total. The possible answers were "no" (=0), "yes" (=1) and "sometimes" (=2). The distribution od answers regarding this question are listed in Table 13.

Table 13. Wearing religious clothing or accessories

	Frequency	%
No	209	78,6%
Yes	32	12%
Sometimes	25	9,4%
Total	266	100%

A great number of believers responded negatively to this question (78,6%, 209 respondents). This is followed by 12% (32 respondents) who answered "Yes" and 9,4% (25 respondents) who indicated "Sometimes." A total of 57 respondents who

answered either “Yes” or “Sometimes” were directed to the next question, appearing only to them, where they were asked, “Do you feel that people in Padua discriminate you for your religious dress/accessories?”. The possible answers were only “Yes” or “No”, as demonstrated in Table 14.

Table 14. Religious dress/accessories related discrimination

	Frequency	**%**
No	47	82.5%
Yes	10	17.5%
Total	57	100%

The majority, 82,5% (47 respondents), answered negatively, while 17,5% (10 respondents) answered positively to this question. Since having a cross necklace might be perceived differently than wearing hijab, as the first is the symbol of the dominant religion in Italy while the other is the symbol of Islam, analysis to see if there is a certain religious belief whose followers reported negatively is to be done in the data analysis section. However, the fact that only a small portion of respondents are reported to wear religious dress/accessories, might cause problems in conducting meaningful statistical analysis. This will be further discussed within the “1.5. Limitations and Further Research” section.

Respondents who have religious beliefs of any kind were directed to the questions of the Religious Discrimination Scale developed by Allen et al. (2018), which is an 11-item instrument identifying three subscales of perceived religious discrimination experiences, which are “Perceived Prejudice” assessing overt prejudice, “Closet Symptoms” referring to internalized feelings of needing to hide religious identity and “Negative Labels” dealing with being negatively labeled due to religious beliefs. They founded this new instrument on the Everyday Discrimination Scale (Williams et al., 1997) and the Daily Life Experience subscale of the Racism and Life Experience Scale (Harrell, 1994). The reliability and validity analyses were conducted by Allen et al. (2018) and the instrument has been found valid to measure religious discrimination for both genders. However, as addressed also by Allen et al. (2018) among the limitations of the scale, the validation of the psychometric properties were made only on a sample composed by the members of

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly known as Mormons) living in Utah, United States, where they are the religious majority. This issue will be further discussed in the "1.5. Limitations and Further Research" section.

The questions of the Religious Discrimination Scale, reported below, were used in this research without any alteration. The possible answers, as suggested by Allen et al. (2018), were based on a Likert scale ranging from "Never" (=1) to "Always" (=5). The question number 1, 2, 6, 7 and 8 were designed to measure "Perceived Prejudice" subscale. The question number 3, 9 and 10 were designed to measure "Negative Labels" subscale. Finally, the questions number 4, 5 and 11 were designed to measure "Closet Symptoms" subscale.

Answers were coded according to the reoccurrence of the discriminatory acts, from "Never"=0 to "Always"=4, then summed to create separate scores for each subscale represented by ratio scale variables (ranging between 0-100). A fourth general ratio scale variable was calculated as the unweighted average of the three subscale scores, representing an overall measure of religious discrimination.

1. I felt disrespected because of my religious views.
2. I was ignored because I am a religious person.
3. People assumed things about me because of my religion.
4. I felt inclined to keep my religious affiliation private.
5. I was afraid of others finding out about my religious beliefs.
6. Felt socially avoided by others due to my religion.
7. I was passed over for opportunities due to my religion.
8. I sense hostility from others because of my religious affiliation.
9. I have heard people make unfriendly remarks about my religion.
10. Others hold negative stereotypes of people with my religion.
11. I do not feel free to express who I am religiously.

After having completed the Religious Discrimination Scale, all respondents were directed to the last two questions of the survey, regarding the actual international conflicts which were: "Have you felt increased discrimination following the

escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War began in February 2022?" and "Have you felt increased discrimination following the Israel-Hamas War began in October 2023?". The possible answers were "Strongly disagree", "Disagree", "Neutral", "Agree" and "Strongly agree". Even though when creating these questions the guidelines described by Piergiorgio Corbetta (2003) were used, possible ambiguities are discussed within the "1.5. Limitations and Further Research" section.

Upon the completion of the survey, the respondents were advised to visit the University of Padua's website created to combat discrimination, harassment and gender-based violence, eqipped with indications on helplines and various ways to report discriminatory acts.

1.4. Data Analysis, Results and Discussion

To analyze the data obtained from the survey IBM SPSS Statistics (version 29.0.1) was used. The ratio scale variables created for the Everyday Discrimination Scale, labeled as "EDS", and for the Religious Discrimination Scale, labeled as "RDS", were both highly positively skewed (EDS=4,158 and RDS=1,184), as Tables 15 and 16 below describe. There is no normal distribution for both variables and transforming them into normally distributed variables would not be correct considering the research objectives. The transformed variables would result in being non-interpretable since they would not represent real-world experiences anymore. Additionally, the EDS variable violated also the homogeneity of variances across groups, confirmed by Levene's test results shown in Table 17 below. The RDS variable, instead, did not violate the homogeneity of variances across groups, failing at Levene's test as shown in Table 18.

Considering these results, non-parametric tests were used, since they do not require a normal distribution and homogeneity of variances across groups. Namely, in this research, the Mann-Whitney U test is used to compare two independent samples, the Kruskal-Wallis H test is used to compare three or more independent samples and the Spearman's Rho (ρ) coefficient is used to observe correlation.

Table 15. Skewness analysis for EDS

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Err	Statistic	Std. Err
EDS	589	0,00	2340,00	120,3557	254,46143	4,158	0,101	22,893	0,201

Table 16. Skewness analysis for RDS

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Err	Statistic	Std. Err
RDS	266	25,00	111,67	42,4332	20,25998	1,184	0,149	0,492	0,298

Table 17. Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances for EDS

Dependent Variable: **EDS**			
F	**df1**	**df2**	**Sig.**
34,458	1	587	< 0,001

Tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups.

Design: Intercept + Gender + Age + EthnicBackground + RelationshipUniPD + ItalianCitizenBoth

Table 18. Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances for RDS

Dependent Variable: **RDS**			
F	**df1**	**df2**	**Sig.**
0,024	1	264	0,876

Tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups.

Design: Intercept + Gender + Age + EthnicBackground + RelationshipUniPD + ItalianCitizenBoth

For the first hypothesis, which is written below mathematically, stating that the perception of general discrimination of non-Italian citizens will be higher than that of Italian citizens, the most appropriate analysis is to compare these two groups' general discrimination scores. The dependent variable is the ratio scale variable created by summing the scores obtained from the Everyday Discrimination Scale, labeled as "EDS", while the independent variable is "Italian citizenship" reduced to a dichotomous variable as non-Italian citizens (coded=0) and Italian citizens either by birth or acquired after birth (=1).

As described in 1.3. Methodology section, the confidence level, is set at 95%, with a p-value smaller than 0,05 considered to be statistically significant. The Mann-Whitney U test is used to compare the two groups since it does not require the normal distribution and compares the median ranks between the two groups. The symbol that is used below to rewrite mathematically the alternative (H_a) and null hypotheses (H_0), "M_R", represents the median rank of the observations which is used in non-parametric statistical tests to compare groups based on their median ranks. The descriptive statistics and test results are shown in Tables 19 and 20, respectively.

$$\boldsymbol{H_{a1}}: M_{R\ Non\text{-}Italian} > M_{R\ Italian}$$

$$\boldsymbol{H_{01}}: M_{R\ Non\text{-}Italian} = M_{R\ Italian}$$

Table 19. Descriptive statistics for first hypothesis

	Italian Citizenship	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
EDS	**Non-Italian citizens**	226	332,60	75166,50
	Italian citizens	363	271,59	98588,50
	Total	589		

Table 20. Mann-Whitney U test for first hypothesis

	EDS
Mann-Whitney U	32522,500
Wilcoxon W	98588,500
Z	-4,234
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	< 0,001

Grouping Variable: Italian Citizenship (Dichotomized)

SPSS performs the Mann-Whitney U test by default as two-tailed, without the possibility to choose between one-tailed or two-tailed. The p-value for the two-tailed test is smaller than 0,001. However, since the hypothesis is directional, a one-tailed test would be more appropriate. Since the direction of the analysis is as the hypothesis projected it to be ($M_{R\ Non\text{-}Italian}$ = 332,6, which is higher than the $M_{R\ Italian}$ = 271,59), to obtain the p-value for the one-tailed test is enough to divide the p-

value for the two-tailed test by two, which would result in a new p-value < 0,0005. However, since both values are extremely small, it would not change the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis as it would still be significant at the preestablished significance level of 0,05.

Therefore, as shown in Table 20, there is a statistically significant difference in the EDS score between Italian citizens and non-Italian citizens. The directionality of this difference is in line with the alternative hypothesis, as the non-Italian citizens obtained higher EDS scores than the Italian citizens. The result is significant at a very high confidence level, more than 99,9%. Therefore, turning back to the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) on which this hypothesis was developed, it is possible to state that the situation regarding general discrimination between Italian citizens and non-Italian citizens mirrors what is expected from the theory since Italian citizens constitute an "in-group" being the majority and non-Italian citizens are an "out-group" being the minority.

However, this result might be influenced also by other factors such as gender, age, ethnic background and course of study. Therefore, ANCOVA (Analysis of Covariance) is done to observe if other variables might interfere with this result, which results are shown in Table 21. However, since the distribution of EDS variables across groups has violated the assumption of also the homogeneity of variances, the results of this analysis are to be considered with caution, as discussed in the "1.5. Limitations and Further Research" section.

Table 21. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: **EDS**					
Source	**Type III Sum of Squares**	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**Sig.**
Corrected Model	3792.875*	5	758,575	6,727	< 0,001
Intercept	2277,987	1	2277,987	20,202	< 0,001
Gender	4,052	1	4,052	0,036	0,850
Age	169,434	1	169,434	1,503	0,221
Ethnic Background	721,811	1	721,811	6,401	0,012
Relationship with UniPD	854,866	1	854,866	7,581	0,006
Italian Citizenship	925,614	1	925,614	8,209	0,004
Error	65739,898	583	112,761		
Total	85114,544	589			
Corrected Total	69532,773	588			

*R Squared = 0,055 (Adjusted R Squared = 0,046)

According to the results shown in Table 21, the variables regarding ethnic background and relationship with the University of Padua are also found to be influential on the variance of the EDS score. However, since the R^2 value is reported to be 0,055. This value indicates that only about 5,5% of the total variance in the EDS score is explained by the predictors in the model (gender, age, ethnic background, relationship with the University of Padua and Italian citizenship). Therefore, only a small amount of the variance in the EDS score is explainable using these variables. Other unmeasured factors might have influenced the variance in the scores, as will be discussed in "1.5. Limitations and Further Research" section.

The Mann-Whitney U test is conducted also for the second hypothesis which states that the perception of general discrimination of Italian citizens who acquired their citizenship after birth (coded as=2) will be higher than that of Italian citizens by birth (=1), as noted below.

$$\boldsymbol{H_{a2}}: M_{R\ after\ birth} > M_{R\ by\ birth}$$

$$\boldsymbol{H_{02}}: M_{R\ after\ birth} = M_{R\ by\ birth}$$

Table 22. Descriptive statistics for second hypothesis

Italian Citizens (By birth or acquisition)		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
EDS	**Italian citizens by birth**	342	180,27	61653,50
	Italian citizens acquired after birth	21	210,12	4412,50
	Total	363		

Table 23. Mann-Whitney U test for second hypothesis

	EDS
Mann-Whitney U	3000,500
Wilcoxon W	61653,500
Z	-1,267
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0,205

Grouping Variable: Italian Citizens (By birth or acquisition)

Similar to the previous analysis, the p-value for this test is two-tailed by default on SPSS and directional hypotheses require a one-tailed test. In this case, the two-tailed p-value is 0,205, as shown in Table 23. Dividing this value by two would still result in a p-value higher than the 0,05 significance threshold, meaning the alternative hypothesis would not be rejected under either a one-tailed or two-tailed test as there is no statistically significant difference in the EDS scores between Italian citizens by birth and Italian citizens who acquired citizenship after birth. Therefore, it can be stated that the principles of the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) do not apply to this hypothesis, since there is no statistical evidence confirming the theory. Additionally, the sample size for those who acquired citizenship after birth is small (21 respondents). A greater sample would have brought different results, as will be discussed in the "1.5. Limitations and Further Research" section.

The third hypothesis regards gender-based discrimination, stating that the perception of general discrimination among females is higher than that of males. To test the hypothesis, the Mann-Whitney U test is applied with gender as the independent variable and EDS as the dependent variable. The gender variable is dichotomized considering only the answers that are characterized by binary gender identity as female (coded=1) and male (=0).

$$H_{a3}: M_{R\,female} > M_{R\,male}$$

$$H_{03}: M_{R\,female} = M_{R\,male}$$

Table 24. Descriptive statistics for third hypothesis

Gender (Binary)		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
EDS	Male	207	262,14	54263,50
	Female	362	298,07	107901,50
	Total	569		

Table 25. Mann-Whitney U test for third hypothesis

	EDS
Mann-Whitney U	32735,500
Wilcoxon W	54263,500
Z	-2,510
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0,012

Grouping Variable: Gender (Binary)

The two-tailed p-value resulted in 0,012 as shown in Table 25. Similar to the first two hypotheses, dividing the p-value by two to reach a one-tailed p-value would not change the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis. The one-tailed p-value is even smaller, resulting in approximately 0,006. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis should be accepted, since there is a statistically significant difference between the EDS scores of females and males, resulting in females obtaining higher scores than males.

This finding may highlight a broader societal issue related to gender-based discrimination. As stated by the Theory of Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), the higher EDS scores for females could be reflective of the increased levels of emotional distress and social pressures that women might more often face due to societal gender inequalities. Additionally, this evidence might be also a result of a multilayered combination of other discrimination categories such as ethnicity or citizenship, as suggested by the previous analyses. This statistical result, therefore, provides not only evidence of a gender-based difference in EDS scores but also creates an awareness of the potential social inequalities between women and men

contributing to these differences, emphasizing the need for further analysis of gender-based discrimination in Padua.

The fourth hypothesis, instead, states that the respondents holding a non-binary gender identity will have higher levels of perception of general discrimination than those having a binary gender identity. The gender variable is dichotomized as those who responded "others" and those who responded either "female" or "male" to the question regarding gender identity. Those who responded "prefer not to say" are not included in this analysis.

$$\boldsymbol{H_{a4}}: M_{R\ non\text{-}binary} > M_{R\ binary}$$

$$\boldsymbol{H_{04}}: M_{R\ non\text{-}binary} = M_{R\ binary}$$

Table 26. Descriptive statistics for fourth hypothesis

Gender (Binary/Non-binary)		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
EDS	**Binary**	569	291,94	166114,00
	Non-binary	12	246,42	2957,00
	Total	581		

Table 27. Mann-Whitney U test for fourth hypothesis

	EDS
Mann-Whitney U	2879,000
Wilcoxon W	2957,000
Z	-0,930
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0,352

Grouping Variable: Gender (Binary/Non-binary)

The two-tailed p-value result for this test is 0,352, as shown in Table 27, which is high above 0,05 which is the threshold. Also in this case, dividing the p-value by two to obtain a one-tailed p-value would not change the rejection of the alternative hypothesis, since the p-value would be still greater than 0,05. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis is rejected, since the respondents having a non-binary gender identity have no statistically significant difference in their EDS scores compared to those with binary gender identities.

Turning back to the theory, in this analysis, no evidence was found to link to the Theory of Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) on which this analysis was based. Having a non-binary gender identity does not seem to be an element influencing the perception of general discrimination. However, as was the case for the second hypothesis regarding the perception of general discrimination of Italian citizens who acquired their citizenship after birth and of Italian citizens by birth, also in this hypothesis the sample size for non-binary gender identity holders is small, therefore a more extensive analysis with a greater sample size would have brought a different result. Having only 12 respondents with non-binary gender identity has made the result more vulnerable to these individuals' perceptions, rather than reflecting a broader situation. The issue regarding small sample sizes reducing the statistical power of a test resulting in less generalizable results are further discussed within the "1.5. Limitations and Further Research" section.

The fifth hypothesis is about race-based discrimination, which states that the respondents' perceptions of general discrimination will change across different ethnic groups. A Kruskal-Wallis H test, which is an alternative to ANOVA when the data is not distributed normally, is conducted for this analysis. The data used for this analysis was recoded to redistribute the ethnical background category named "Others" according to the indications that were discussed within the 1.3. Methodology section.

$$\boldsymbol{H_{a5}}: M_{R\ White/European} \neq M_{R\ Middle\ Eastern/North\ African} \neq M_{R\ Sub\text{-}Saharan\ African} \neq M_{R\ Asian} \neq M_{R\ White/European} \neq M_{R\ Latin\ American} \neq M_{R\ Multiracial}$$

$$\boldsymbol{H_{05}}: M_{R\ White/European} = M_{R\ Middle\ Eastern/North\ African} = M_{R\ Sub\text{-}Saharan\ African} = M_{R\ Asian} = M_{R\ White/European} = M_{R\ Latin\ American} = M_{R\ Multiracial}$$

Table 28. Descriptive statistics for fifth hypothesis

	Ethnicity	N	Mean Rank
EDS	**White/European**	410	274,87
	Middle Eastern/North African	66	377,33
	Sub-Saharan African	15	231,97
	Asian	59	336,33
	Latin American	18	353,19
	Multiracial	20	294,18
	Total	588	

Table 29. Kruskal-Wallis H test for fifth hypothesis

	EDS
Kruskal-Wallis H	28,966
df	5
Asymp. Sig.	< 0,001
Grouping Variable: Ethnicity	

The test has resulted to be significant with a p-value smaller than 0,001, as shown in Table 29. Since the Kruskal-Wallis H test is an omnibus test, it does tell that there is a significant difference between groups but does not specify which groups, so performing a post-hoc test to identify which groups are significantly different from the others is necessary. Dunn's test is a suitable post-hoc test to run after running the Kruskal-Wallis H test. However, SPSS does not provide a direct way to run Dunn's test. Therefore, separate Mann-Whitney U tests between each group are done. Successively, a Bonferroni correction is applied to adjust for the increased risk of Type I error (α), which is the rejection of the null hypothesis when it is true. Since the threshold of the p-value to accept the alternative hypothesis was previously established as 0,05, after having done the Bonferroni correction, the new p-value to accept the alternative hypothesis for this analysis would be nearly 0,003.

$$\alpha = 0{,}05 / 15 \approx 0{,}00333$$

Table 30. Descriptive statistics for Mann-Whitney U test between two groups

Ethnicity		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
EDS	**White/European**	410	226,75	92965,50
	Middle Eastern/ North African	66	311,52	20560,50
	Total	476		

Table 31. Mann-Whitney U test between two groups

	EDS
Mann-Whitney U	8710,500
Wilcoxon W	92965,500
Z	-4,651
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	< 0,001

Grouping Variable: Ethnicity

After having conducted separate Mann-Whitney U tests for each group, the only statistically significant result within the new p-value threshold of 0,003 was the comparison of EDS ranking medians between students self-identifying with the "Middle Eastern/North African" ethnical group had higher general discrimination scores than those identifying with "White/European" ethnical group, confirmed by the p-value which resulted below 0,001 as shown in Table 31. As suggested by the Stigma Theory (Goffman, 1963), being from the Middle East and North Africa might be stigmatized among the inhabitants of Padua, leading to a more intense discrimination perception. Additionally, this issue might also be a result of the Attribution Theory (1958) since nowadays the Middle East and North Africa are part of various conflicts and international debates. The individuals from these areas might be more keen to perceive discrimination in an aggravated manner.

However, there is no evidence to support these findings through the lens of the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), since the only ethnical group to have statistically different results was the "Middle Eastern/North African" ethnical group. A hypothetical situation of an "in-group" composed of Europeans discriminating towards an "out-group" composed of other ethnical groups does not hold with this hypothesis since the other groups do not have statistically significant differences in their EDS scores.

Interestingly, the lowest EDS score median rank is "Sub-Saharan African", with a median rank of 231,91. Despite "Sub-Saharan African" has not been found to differ from other groups in a statistically significant manner, this is an important result that indicates that both the highest and lowest median ranks for the EDS score belonged to the minority groups, rather than the "White/European" ethnic group which is the predominant one in Italy. This lack of statistical significance might be due to factors like small sample sizes or high variability within the group. A larger sample size might have yielded different results, as will be discussed in the "1.5. Limitations and Further Research" section.

To test the sixth hypothesis, which states the perceptions of discrimination (both general and religious) will change across different levels of study, a Kruskal-Wallis H test will be conducted. The variable regarding the relationship with the University of Padua is regarded as nominal, as it includes also "Erasmus", "Double-degree" and "Others" categories which do not indicate a natural order. Since age is an important factor that could also influence discrimination perceptions through maturation, a Kruskal-Wallis H test to see whether the perception of general discrimination changes across different age groups will be performed.

$$\boldsymbol{H_{a6}}: M_{R\,BA} \neq M_{R\,MA} \neq M_{R\,One\text{-}Cycle\,MA} \neq M_{R\,Phd} \neq M_{R\,Erasmus} \neq M_{R\,Double\,degree} \neq M_{R\,Other}$$

$$\boldsymbol{H_{06}}: M_{R\,BA} = M_{R\,MA} = M_{R\,One\text{-}Cycle\,MA} = M_{R\,Phd} = M_{R\,Erasmus} = M_{R\,Double\,degree} = M_{R\,Other}$$

Table 32. Descriptive statistics for sixth hypothesis (EDS)

Relationship UniPD		N	Mean Rank
EDS	**BA**	182	281,88
	MA	260	317,59
	One-cycle MA	26	255,79
	PhD	88	277,11
	Erasmus	19	304,76
	Double degree	7	247,64
	Other	7	188,36
	Total	589	

Table 33. Kruskal-Wallis H test for sixth hypothesis (EDS)

	EDS
Kruskal-Wallis H	11,387
df	6
Asymp. Sig.	0,077

Grouping Variable: Relationship UniPD

As the results shown in Table 33 suggest, the p-value is resulted to be 0,077, which is higher than 0,05. Therefore, there is no statistically significant difference in the EDS scores across different levels of study. Similarly, neither the RDS score was significantly different across levels of study as shown below in Table 35, as the p-value resulted being 0,534. As was noted in the other analysis, a small sample size might have caused this result. While some groups such as "MA" and "BA" had many respondents, groups like "Other" and "Double degree" included only a few respondents.

Table 34. Descriptive statistics for sixth hypothesis (RDS)

Relationship UniPD		N	Mean Rank
RDS	**BA**	92	136,14
	MA	115	132,30
	One-cycle MA	10	131,45
	PhD	30	144,05
	Erasmus	11	131,45
	Double degree	3	124,17
	Other	5	63,30
	Total	266	

Table 35. Kruskal-Wallis H test for sixth hypothesis (RDS)

	RDS
Kruskal-Wallis H	5,080
df	6
Asymp. Sig.	0,534

Grouping Variable: Relationship UniPD

As noted before, the age and the level of study are two variables that are closely connected, as shown by the crosstabulation below in Table 36. Younger students are more likely to be enrolled as Bachelor's students, while greater ages are associated with more advanced study levels such as Master's degree and PhD. As shown in Table 38 below, the Kruskal-Wallis H test for the EDS score proved to be valid (p-value=0,025). There is a significant difference in the EDS scores across different groups of ages. The confidence level for this result is more than 99,9%. Similar to the method used for the previous hypothesis, also in this case the separate Mann-Whitney U tests between pairwise groups to identify which groups differ significantly from the others were performed due to the lack of Dunn's test on SPSS.

Since the threshold of the p-value to accept the alternative hypothesis was previously established as 0,05, after the Bonferroni correction, the new p-value for separate Mann-Whitney U tests to accept the alternative hypothesis would be 0,0083.

$$\alpha = 0{,}05 / 6 \approx 0{,}0083$$

Table 36. Crosstabulation between Age and Relationship UniPD

		Relationship UniPD							
		BA	**MA**	**One-cycle MA**	**PhD**	**Erasmus**	**Double degree**	**Other**	**Total**
Age	**18-21**	105	2	14	0	5	1	1	128
	22-25	67	167	11	10	13	3	2	273
	26-29	6	68	1	54	1	2	2	134
	30 and above	4	23	0	24	0	1	2	54
Total		182	260	26	88	19	7	7	589

Table 37. Descriptive statistics for Age (EDS)

Age		N	Mean Rank
EDS	**18-21**	128	267,27
	22-25	273	293,50
	26-29	134	329,71
	30 and above	54	282,17
	Total	589	

Table 38. Kruskal-Wallis H test for Age (EDS)

	EDS
Kruskal-Wallis H	9,315
df	3
Asymp. Sig.	0,025

Grouping Variable: Age

After having performed six separate Mann-Whitney U tests with different groups of age as the independent variable and the EDS as the dependent variable, only the comparison between 18-21 years old students and 26-29 years old students is found to be statistically significant with a p-value of 0,003 shown in Table 40. Therefore, the 26-29 years old students have a higher mean rank of EDS score than the 18-21 group, which is an indication that the 26-29 years old students have generally higher EDS scores than the 18-21 group. Also in this case the confidence level is more than 99,9%. While it is difficult to assess with certainty the reason behind this difference, other demographical attributes such as Italian citizenship and ethnic group might have contributed to it.

Table 39. Descriptive statistics for 18-21 and 26-29 age groups (EDS)

Age		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
EDS	**18-21**	128	117,23	15006,00
	26-29	134	145,13	19447,00
	Total	262		

Table 40. Mann-Whitney U test between 18-21 and 26-29 age group (EDS)

	EDS
Mann-Whitney U	6750,000
Wilcoxon W	15006,000
Z	-2,980
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0,003
Grouping Variable: Age	

As suggested by the crosstabs below in Tables 41 and 42 regarding the respondents' age and their situation regarding Italian citizenship and ethnic groups, respectively, the students between 26-29 years old are more likely to be non-Italian citizens (68 respondents over 134, making 50,74%) and within this age group there are more respondents from the "Middle Eastern/North African" ethnic group (25 respondents over 134, making 18,65%) than the 18-21 years old age group. The 18-21 years old age group has only 30 respondents out of 128 (23,43%) who are not Italian citizens and only 9 respondents from the "Middle Eastern/North African" ethnic group (7,03%). Therefore, the difference in perceptions of general discrimination between those aged 18-21 and those aged 26-29 is more likely to be linked to these two factors.

Table 41. Crosstabulation between Italian citizenship and Age

		Age				**Total**
		18-21	**22-25**	**26-29**	**30 and above**	
Italian citizenship	**No**	30	94	68	34	226
	Yes, by birth	93	168	62	19	342
	Yes, obtained after birth	5	11	4	1	21
Total		128	273	134	54	589

Table 42. Crosstabulation between Ethnicity and Age

		Age				Total
		18-21	**22-25**	**26-29**	**30 and above**	
Ethnicity	**White/European**	102	195	75	25	397
	Middle Eastern/ North African	9	24	25	7	65
	Sub-Saharan African	2	10	1	2	15
	Asian	4	18	19	13	54
	Latin American	2	4	7	5	18
	Multiracial	7	9	1	2	19
	Others	2	13	6	0	21
Total		128	273	134	54	589

A Kruskal-Wallis H test is performed also for the RDS score to see if any group of age had a different result. However, as shown in Table 44, the p-value for this analysis resulted in being highly above the 0,05 limit (=0,531). Therefore, there is no statistically significant difference in the RDS scores between the different groups of age.

Table 43. Descriptive statistics for sixth hypothesis (RDS)

Age		**N**	**Mean Rank**
RDS	**18-21**	61	122,80
	22-25	129	139,88
	26-29	55	130,98
	30 and above	21	131,98
	Total	266	

Table 44. Kruskal-Wallis H test for sixth hypothesis (RDS)

	RDS
Kruskal-Wallis H	2,205
df	3
Asymp. Sig.	0,531
Grouping Variable: Age	

The seventh hypothesis states that longer periods of living in Padua and in the Province of Padua are associated with lower levels of perception of general and religious discrimination. This hypothesis would require a correlation analysis since

it searches for a relationship between two variables. As the variable "Living in Padua" is an ordinal variable having three categories, the most suitable analysis for this analysis is Spearman's rank coefficient (ρ) which is indicated when aiming to capture the correlation between an ordinal variable and a non-normally distributed continuous variable. Spearman's rank correlation is suitable also for variables that are not dichotomous, which is the case for this analysis.

$$H_{a7}: \rho < 0$$

$$H_{07}: \rho = 0$$

Table 45. Spearman's rank coefficient (ρ) for seventh hypothesis (EDS)

			Living in Padua	EDS
Spearman's rho	**Living in Padua**	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	-0,007
		Sig. (2-tailed)		0,857
		N	589	589
	EDS	Correlation Coefficient	-0,007	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0,857	
		N	589	589

As shown in Table 45, the p-value for this analysis resulted to be 0,857, which is much greater than 0,05. Therefore, there is no correlation between the time spent living in Padua and the province of Padua and the EDS score, as the test is not statistically significant. Even if the results were statistically significant, the correlation coefficient is -0,007 which indicates an extremely weak negative correlation, practically equal to no correlation.

Table 46. Spearman's rank coefficient (ρ) for seventh hypothesis (RDS)

			Living in Padua	RDS
Spearman's rho	**Living in Padua**	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	0,028
		Sig. (2-tailed)		0,652
		N	589	266
	RDS	Correlation Coefficient	0,028	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0,652	
		N	266	266

Neither the correlation analysis between the time spent living in Padua and the RDS score is found to be statistically significant, as the p-value resulted in being 0,652, as shown in Table 46. Therefore, having lived in Padua and the province of Padua is not correlated to the RDS score. Given the results obtained from these analyses, it is less likely that students newly arrived to Padua perceive higher discrimination at the early stages of their stay. Therefore, there is no link between the findings obtained from this sample and the Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958).

The eighth hypothesis states that the respondents who declared to have a religious belief will have higher levels of general discrimination compared to those without any religious beliefs. To test this hypothesis the Mann-Whitney U test is performed. The nominal variable regarding religious beliefs was dichotomized as those without a religious belief (coded=0) and those believing in a religion (=1), which covered all the other answers that were given.

$$\boldsymbol{H_{a8}}: M_{R\ religious} > M_{R\ non\text{-}religious}$$

$$\boldsymbol{H_{08}}: M_{R\ religious} = M_{R\ non\text{-}religious}$$

Table 47. Descriptive statistics for eighth hypothesis

Religion		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
EDS	**Without a religious belief**	323	298,79	96508,00
	Believing in a religion	266	290,40	77247,00
	Total	589		

Table 48. Mann-Whitney U test for eighth hypothesis

	EDS
Mann-Whitney U	41736,000
Wilcoxon W	77247,000
Z	-0,596
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0,551

Grouping Variable: Religion

As shown in Table 48, the p-value of 0,551 is highly above the limit of 0,05, therefore, the alternative hypothesis is rejected. Given the directionality of the hypothesis, a one-tailed p-value would have to be used, however, even when the p-value is divided by two (which is nearly 0,275), it would have still resulted in rejecting the alternative hypothesis. There is no statistically significant difference between believers and non-believers in their EDS scores. Therefore, there is no evidence to link these results to the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) on which this hypothesis was based.

This analysis gave an important insight regarding the discrimination based on religious beliefs among the university students in Padua, since in case there were a strong and evident instance of such discrimination the results would have shown a different trend with a p-value smaller than 0,05. However, a high p-value does not directly prove the absence of discrimination. It rather shows that the database obtained from this sample does not provide sufficient evidence to support a difference in the EDS scores. While this result alone would not be sufficient to state that there is no religion-based discrimination among the university students in Padua, it is a good indicator of such a situation.

The ninth hypothesis states that the respondents professing the Catholic Christian religion will report lower religious discrimination levels than those professing other beliefs. The variable regarding religion is at this time dichotomized as Catholic Christians (coded as=0) and all others who declared to believe in any religion (=1) by using SPSS syntax. The frequency table regarding this new variable is as shown below in Table 49, including 140 Catholic Christians and 126 respondents believing in other religions or other branches of Christianity. For this analysis, the Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare the RDS scores between these two groups.

$$\boldsymbol{H_{a9}}\textbf{:}\ M_{R\ Catholic} < M_{R\ other\ beliefs}$$

$$\boldsymbol{H_{09}}\textbf{:}\ M_{R\ Catholic} = M_{R\ other\ beliefs}$$

Table 49. Descriptive statistics for ninth hypothesis

Catholic vs All		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
RDS	**Catholic Christians**	140	128,66	18012,50
	Believe in any religion	126	138,88	17498,50
	Total	266		

Table 50. Mann-Whitney U test for ninth hypothesis

	RDS
Mann-Whitney U	8142,500
Wilcoxon W	18012,500
Z	-1,099
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0,272

Grouping Variable: Catholic vs All

The results, shown in Table 50, indicated no statistically significant difference between these two groups in their RDS scores, as the two-tailed p-value resulted in 0,272. The one-tailed p-value would result in 0,136, which would have been still above the 0,05 significance threshold. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis is rejected. There is no statistically significant evidence to support the hypothesis that Catholic Christians face lower levels of religious discrimination than their counterparts from other religious groups. Additionally, this result was of crucial importance since the Catholic Christians are the religious majority in Italy. Also within this analysis, there was no evidence to link the finding to the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

A similar hypothesis is hypothesis number nine-*bis*, which states that Muslim students will have higher levels of religious discrimination given the rising phenomena of Islamophobia in Italy, confirmed by the literature (Sciortino, 2002; Guolo 2003; Allievi, 2014). The variable regarding religion is also this time dichotomized as Muslims (coded as=0) and all others who declared to believe in any religion (=1) by using SPSS syntax. The frequency table regarding this new variable is shown below in Table 51, which demonstrates the presence of 52 Muslim students, alongside 214 students who profess other religions. Also for this analysis, the Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare the RDS scores between these two groups.

$$H_{a9\text{-}bis}: M_{R\ Muslims} > M_{R\ other\ beliefs}$$

$$H_{09\text{-}bis}: M_{R\ Muslims} = M_{R\ other\ beliefs}$$

Table 51. Descriptive statistics for ninth-bis hypothesis

Muslim vs All		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
RDS	**Muslims**	52	165,13	8586,50
	Believe in any religion	214	125,82	26924,50
	Total	266		

Table 52. Mann-Whitney U test for ninth-bis hypothesis

	RDS
Mann-Whitney U	3919,500
Wilcoxon W	26924,500
Z	-3,357
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	< 0,001

Grouping Variable: Muslim vs All

As the p-value resulted in being less than 0,001 shown in Table 52, the alternative hypothesis is confirmed. Muslim students are revealed to perceive higher levels of religious discrimination compared to students professing other beliefs. This finding is crucial for the research since while students from the Catholic Christian faith are not revealed to report lower levels of religious discrimination, as demonstrated by the ninth hypothesis, Muslim students indeed reported to perceive higher levels of religious discrimination. This evidence might be a strong indicator of the presence of Islamophobia in Padua and in the province of Padua, which requires further analysis specific to the Muslim population in the city.

The tenth hypothesis states that among the students with religious beliefs, those who wear religious clothing or accessories perceive different levels of religious discrimination compared to those who do not. Since the variable regarding religious clothing has three groups: those who do not wear (=0), those who wear (=1) and those who wear sometimes (=2), for this analysis, a Kruskal-Wallis H test is performed with the wearing of religious dress or accessories as the independent variable and RDS score as the dependent variable.

$$\boldsymbol{H_{a10}}: M_{R\ always} \neq M_{R\ sometimes} \neq M_{R\ never}$$

$$\boldsymbol{H_{010}}: M_{R\ always} = M_{R\ sometimes} = M_{R\ never}$$

Table 53. Descriptive statistics for tenth hypothesis

Religious dress		N	Mean Rank
RDS	**No**	209	127,46
	Yes	32	153,95
	Sometimes	25	157,82
	Total	266	

Table 54. Kruskal-Wallis H test for tenth hypothesis

	RDS
Kruskal-Wallis H	6,242
df	2
Asymp. Sig.	0,044
Grouping Variable: Religious dress	

A statistically significant difference across groups was found, as the p-value for the Kruskal-Wallis H test resulted in 0,044 as shown in Table 52. As stated previously, since SPSS does not allow for a Dunn's test, separate Mann-Whitney U tests between each group are done. The Bonferroni correction to reduce the Type I error (α) is as stated below. The p-value threshold for this analysis will be nearly 0,0166.

$$\alpha = 0{,}05 / 3 \approx 0{,}0166$$

Since none of the pairwise Mann-Whitney U tests resulted in a p-value below the Bonferroni-corrected threshold of 0,016, it would be correct to state that there is no significant difference between any groups at the adjusted significance level. However, having such a small p-value makes the analysis rather strict. Therefore, the risk of rejecting the alternative hypothesis when it is to be accepted becomes higher.

Additionally, as indicated by the crosstabulation between the religious groups and groups regarding wearing religious dress or accessories shown in Table 55

below, it is interesting to notice that the majority of the students who reported wearing either always or sometimes such items are Christians, which is likely to be caused by the greater number of Christian students included in the research. Indeed, Muslim students had a higher percentage of wearing religious dress or accessories compared to their group size, as 17 students out of 52 reported wearing such items either always or sometimes (which indicates 32,69%). As confirmed by the findings of the hypothesis number nine-bis, Muslim students reported significantly higher RDS scores compared to students professing other beliefs. Therefore, this analysis is closely associated with the findings of the analysis regarding Muslim students.

Table 54. Crosstabulation between Religious groups and groups regarding wearing religious dress or accessories

		Religious dress or accessories			Total
		No	Yes	Sometimes	
Religions	**Christianity**	137	16	11	164
	Islam	35	12	5	52
	Judaism	1	2	4	7
	Hinduism	5	0	2	7
	Buddhism	3	0	0	3
	Others	7	2	2	11
	Prefer not to say	21	0	1	22
Total		209	32	25	266

Since Muslim students are revealed to perceive higher levels of religious discrimination and they are more likely to wear religious dress or accessories as suggested by the crosstabulation, a multivariate linear regression analysis is conducted to understand better the effects of other variables (namely gender, Italian citizenship, level of study, age, ethnic background and religion) to the changes in RDS scores and to see if being Muslim and/or wearing religious dress or accessories are predictors of the change in RDS scores.

Table 55. Model summary for multivariate linear regression

Model Summary			
R	**R Square**	**Adjusted R Square**	**Std. Error of the Estimate**
,301	0,091	0,062	19,61976

Predictors: (Constant), Muslim vs All, Religion, Relationship UniPD, Religious dress, Gender, Ethnicity, Age, Italian citizenship

Table 56. Analysis of variance for multivariate linear regression

ANOVA					
Model	**Sum of Squares**	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**Sig.**
Regression	9845,408	8	1230,676	3,197	,002
Residual	98928,249	257	384,935		
Total	108773,658	265			

Dependent Variable: RDS

Predictors: (Constant), Muslim vs All, Religion, Relationship UniPD, Religious dress, Gender, Ethnicity, Age, Italian citizenship

Table 57. Coefficients for multivariate linear regression

Coefficients							
	Unstandardized Coefficients		**Standardized Coefficients**	**t**	**Sig.**	**Collinearity Statistics**	
	B	**Std. Error**	**Beta**			**Tolerance**	**VIF**
(Constant)	49,310	5,065		9,736	< 0,001		
Gender	3,369	2,021	0,101	1,667	0,097	0,954	1,048
Italian citizenship	0,064	2,435	0,002	0,026	0,979	0,777	1,288
Relationship UniPD	-1,178	0,982	-0,079	-1,200	0,231	0,822	1,216
Age	0,395	1,562	0,017	0,253	0,801	0,808	1,237
Ethnicity	-0,369	0,873	-0,028	-0,423	0,673	0,812	1,231
Religion	-0,074	0,661	-0,007	-0,112	0,911	0,927	1,078
Religious dress and accessories	4,908	1,948	0,154	2,520	0,012	0,951	1,052
Muslim vs All	-9,736	3,247	-0,191	-2,998	0,003	0,873	1,146

Dependent Variable: RDS

The regression output, in Table 56, shows a moderate relationship between the listed independent variables and the RDS scores, with an R value of 0,301. The R^2 value resulted as 0,091, which indicates that the model explains only 9,1% of the variance in the RDS scores. Therefore, the model suggests low explanatory power.

The F-value, shown in Table 57, is 3,197 with a p-value of 0,002, indicating that the model has a statistically significant effect on RDS scores.

In Table 58, all variables are listed with their respective p-values. Most of them do not have a statistically significant effect on RDS scores, as their p-values exceed the threshold of 0,05. Only the variables regarding religious dress and accessories and the variable named "Muslim vs All" (the dichotomous variable constituted by Muslims and those having another faith) have a significant effect on RDS with a p-value of 0,012 and 0,003, respectively. This means only these two variables are useful in explaining variations in RDS scores. Other variables, namely gender, Italian citizenship, relationship with the university, age, ethnicity and religion have no significant impact on the dependent variable. As the VIF statistics values, shown in Table 58, are around 1 for both variables, which is a small value, there is no multicollinearity in this model. Therefore, being Muslim and wearing religious clothing and accessories are affecting independently the RDS scores' variation, without evidence of overlapping effects. Overall, despite this model showing limited explanatory power to explain the variations in RDS scores, it showed that these two variables are useful in explaining the RDS scores without being disturbed by other variables' effects.

Since wearing religious dress or accessories was revealed to be influential on the change in RDS scores, resulting in a beta value of 4,908 which indicates a positive direction as shown in Table 58, the alternative hypothesis is accepted. Wearing religious dress or accessories is influential on religious discrimination, as they increase the RDS scores. This result constitutes a crucial finding of this research since wearing religious clothing or accessories makes the individual more targetable to discrimination based on religious belief as it suggests a higher level of religiosity, based on the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; 1979; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It is possible to link this finding also to the Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958) since individuals who wear such items might be more keen to perceive non-discriminatory acts as discrimination.

The eleventh and twelfth hypotheses are related to the last two questions of the survey regarding international conflicts. They state that the Christian-Orthodox students will report having felt increased discrimination following the escalation of

the Russo-Ukrainian War and, similarly, the Jewish students will report increased discrimination following the escalation of the Israel-Hamas War. Two new dichotomous variables are created for these two hypotheses: the first is Christian Orthodox (coded as=0) and all other respondents (=1) and the second is Jewish (coded as=0) and all other respondents (=1). Also for these analyses, the Mann-Whitney U test will be used. However, only small amounts of students have declared to be Orthodox Christian (12 respondents) and Jewish (7 respondents). Therefore, the results will have to be taken into consideration cautiously, as it will be discussed in "1.5. Limitations and Further Research" section.

$$H_{a11}: M_{R\ Christian\ Orthodox} > M_{R\ other\ groups}$$

$$H_{011}: M_{R\ Christian\ Orthodox} = M_{R\ other\ groups}$$

Table 58. Descriptive statistics for eleventh hypothesis

Christian Orthodox vs All		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Russian-Ukrainian War	**Orthodox Christian**	12	372,79	4473,50
	All other respondents	577	293,38	169281,50
	Total	589		

Table 59. Mann-Whitney U test for eleventh hypothesis

	Russian-Ukrainian War
Mann-Whitney U	2528,500
Wilcoxon W	169281,500
Z	-1,670
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0,095

Grouping Variable: Christian Orthodox vs All

$$H_{a12}: M_{R\ Jewish} > M_{R\ other\ groups}$$

$$H_{012}: M_{R\ Jewish} = M_{R\ other\ groups}$$

Table 60. Descriptive statistics for twelfth hypothesis

Jewish vs All		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Israel-Hamas War	**Jewish**	7	332,79	2329,50
	All other respondents	582	294,55	171425,50
	Total	589		

Table 61. Mann-Whitney U test for twelfth hypothesis

	Israel-Hamas War
Mann-Whitney U	1772,500
Wilcoxon W	171425,500
Z	-0,607
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0,544

Grouping Variable: Jewish vs All

As the p-values showed (=0,095 for the analysis regarding Orthodox Christians shown in Table 60 and 0,544 for the analysis regarding the Jewish shown in Table 62), there has been no statistically significant evidence stating that these groups have felt increased discrimination following the escalation of the international conflicts relevant to them. This constitutes another interesting result of this research. However, the results have to be taken with caution since the sample sizes are small and the interpretability of this question is debatable. Additionally, it is possible that with a greater sample size being a Jew might have been linked to a possible aggravated perception of discrimination caused by the relative conflict. This is confirmed also by a much smaller p-value (=0,095) regarding the eleventh hypothesis compared to the p-value of the twelfth hypothesis (=0,544). However, the idea that being a Jew causes aggravated discrimination due to the Israeli-Hamas War does not seem applicable to the Russian-Ukrainian War, since neither Ukraine nor Russia are the only Christian Orthodox majority countries in the world. These issues will be further discussed in the "1.5. Limitations and Further Research" section.

Lastly, the thirteenth hypothesis states that the perception of religious discrimination will differ across different ethnic groups. Therefore, the Kruskal-Wallis H test is used with the RDS as the dependent variable and ethnic background as the independent variable. The data used for this analysis was recoded to

redistribute the ethnical background category named "Others" according to the indications that were discussed within "1.3. Methodology section".

$$\boldsymbol{H_{a13}}: M_{R\ White/European} \neq M_{R\ Middle\ Eastern/North\ African} \neq M_{R\ Sub\text{-}Saharan\ African} \neq M_{R\ Asian} \neq M_{R\ White/European} \neq M_{R\ Latin\ American} \neq M_{R\ Multiracial}$$

$$\boldsymbol{H_{a13}}: M_{R\ White/European} = M_{R\ Middle\ Eastern/North\ African} = M_{R\ Sub\text{-}Saharan\ African} = M_{R\ Asian} = M_{R\ White/European} = M_{R\ Latin\ American} = M_{R\ Multiracial}$$

Table 62. Descriptive statistics for thirteenth hypothesis

Ethnicity		N	Mean Rank
RDS	**White/European**	171	131,84
	Middle Eastern/North African	28	165,30
	Sub-Saharan African	13	93,96
	Asian	40	139,35
	Latin American	8	101,00
	Multiracial	6	122,42
	Total	266	

Table 63. Kruskal-Wallis H test for thirteenth hypothesis

	RDS
Kruskal-Wallis H	10,404
df	5
Asymp. Sig.	0,065
Grouping Variable: Ethnicity	

The results are found to be not significant since the p-value resulted in 0,065 as shown in Table 64. Therefore, there is no statistically significant difference in the RDS scores across the different ethnic groups. Therefore, no evidence has been obtained from this analysis to support the theories on which this research is based. Despite the statistically insignificant result, it is still possible to observe that the group with the lowest median rank for the RDS score is the "Sub-Saharan African" ethnic group. In contrast, the ethnic group with the highest median rank for the RDS score is the "Middle Eastern/North African" group. This pattern mirrors the findings from the fifth hypothesis which stated that the respondents' perceptions of general discrimination would change across different ethnic groups. Therefore, the

fifth hypothesis made the same statement but with the EDS scores, where the same ethnic groups displayed a similar trend. Considering the results, it would be correct to affirm that there is a tendency among the "Middle Eastern/North African" to have higher scores in both EDS and RDS. Similarly, the "Sub-Saharan African" ethnic group tends to have lower scores. While this trend is not statistically significant within this analysis, it suggests a possible tendency in the data that warrants further investigation with larger samples or more in-depth analysis regarding these two groups.

Alongside the other findings, this result provides further evidence pointing to the absence or non-significance of religious-based discrimination within the university context in Padua. The lack of statistically significant differences in RDS scores across various ethnic and religious groups suggests that, within this sample, religious discrimination may not be a prominent issue. However, as highlighted by the results from previous hypotheses, concerns related to gender-based and race-based discrimination remain evident and require a deeper investigation. These findings suggest that while religious discrimination appears to be minimal or non-significant, discrimination based on gender and race still poses challenges that require further exploration and action within the university context.

1.5. Limitations and Further Research

As discussed in the 1.3. Methodology section, a voluntary response sampling method was used to reach the respondents. However, this sampling method might cause a self-selection bias as the individuals who took part in this research were those who wanted to take part in it. This means that individuals who were reached out by the researcher as they fit into the inclusion criteria but for any personal reasons such as concerns about the anonymity of the research, inclination to keep the personal experiences very private, participation burden, etc., decided to not take part of it was excluded from the research. This was a crucial limitation for this research since both the EDS and RDS measured personal experiences that are usually not so easy to talk about. For instance, some of the questions from the RDS assessed the so-called "Closet Symptoms", referring to those situations when the individual seeks to live privately their religious beliefs to a certain extent that they

even “hide” from others. The individuals who took part in this research should have had already at least a moderate attitude toward expressing their religiosity, as an individual who is truly committed to keeping their religious sphere private probably would not even decide to participate in the research. Therefore, individuals who are more private about their religious beliefs may have been underrepresented in the sample, which affects the generalizability of the findings.

Similarly, an individual who believes to be discriminated against might be more likely to participate in the research to make their voices heard and, on the contrary, an individual not experiencing discrimination might abstain from the research erroneously thinking that they are not the researcher’s target. In future research, this issue can be addressed, despite not fully, by implementing a different kind of research design where individuals upon the completion of the survey get a financial incentive to compensate for their time spent on this research, such as a small amount of money or a discount coupon. However, also financial incentives might create new biases, such as attracting more economically disadvantaged individuals to participate which might reduce the generalizability of the sample. As in many social research, the sampling method implemented due to various constraints constitutes the core limitation of the research.

Another important limitation of this research is that the sample obtained was not revealed to be representative of the population of the students enrolled at the University of Padua and living in Padua and in the province of Padua. Some groups such as females, Master’s degree students and foreigners were overrepresented. Furthermore, since the University of Padua did not disclose many demographic attributes of its students such as age distribution or ethnical origin, in many cases it was not possible to compare the sample’s distribution to the real distribution. This was mainly caused by the lack of a complete list of students that might be included in the research and the ability to reach them all. For future research, a random sampling method, which might be clustered or stratified, can be implemented and the research might be sponsored by the official bodies of the University of Padua that have access to a complete list of students fitting into the research criteria and their mail addresses.

An additional limitation was that of the question regarding the ethnical background, which included a list of broad categories such as “Asian”, “European” or “Sub-Saharan African” which might be leading to an oversimplification of the cultural varieties within these areas. Since the attribute that was tried to obtain from this question was rather phenotypical, the usage of a list of broad ethnic groups was necessary. These categories led also to some confusion, especially for the individuals from the areas bordering different continents, such as Türkiye. For further research, a more detailed list of ethnic categories, including areas like Anatolia, Caucasus, West Africa, East Africa, Southeast Asia, etc. might be used to avoid any confusion. However, if not combined also with a much greater sample size, such a list would create a more fragmented sample with a small number of respondents for each category. This would be a concern in comparing different groups.

Unfortunately, only a small number of respondents were found to identify themselves with Judaism, Christian denominations other than Catholicism, Muslim denominations other than Sunni Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. This created a problem when comparing the median ranks of different groups since while the Catholic Christians were numerous enough to be robust against outliers, these groups were not. A similar issue was found also for the respondents who reported wearing religious clothing or accessories and those who acquired Italian citizenship after birth. These small sample sizes can weaken the reliability of such comparisons. For further research, if the comparison between groups is more important than the generalizability, a target population approach in the sampling method might be used.

Another important limitation is regarding the Religious Discrimination Scale, which was developed and tested for its validation of the psychometric properties by Allen et al. (2018). However, as stated before, this validation test was done on a sample composed of the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, more commonly Mormons, living in Utah, United States, which constitute the religious majority. Therefore, the RDS was not tested as a valid measure to be used on religious minorities and groups composed of different religions, making the generalizability of its psychometric properties for this research remain unproven.

The RDS was still found to be a coherent method for this research since its structure is very similar to that of EDS and this was a great advantage for the fluidity of the survey. A measure proved to be valid also on religious minorities and multiple religions may be used for further research.

Regarding the questions on international conflicts, namely the Russian-Ukrainian and Israel-Hamas wars, and their implications on perceived discrimination, a possible ambiguity was identified after the data collection phase was already initiated. It was revealed that while the question asks about the respondent's perception of increased discrimination against themselves, as was the case for all the other questions, for this specific question some respondents might have understood the question as asking about "observed" increased discrimination toward others as well. While it is difficult to address whether this possible ambiguity altered in a significant way the results, it remains a concern in the interpretation of the results. More detailed pre-testing on the survey before starting the data collection phase may be a better option for further research.

Additionally, still regarding the eleventh and twelfth hypotheses, it should be noted that while Judaism and Israel are two closely related entities as Israel is the only country in the world where the majority religion is Judaism, the same relationship is not present between Orthodox Christianity and the Russian-Ukrainian War, as there are also many countries in Eastern Europe and the Balkans that despite not being part of the conflict, majority of their citizens are of Orthodox Christian faith. Therefore, while considering being a Jew as a possible aggravator of sensibility towards the relative conflict might be a valid choice given the importance of the State of Israel within the Jewish faith, the same approach does not apply to the Russian-Ukrainian War. Further research regarding religious discrimination and conflict studies might take into consideration both religion and country of origin as variables to avoid this issue.

A more general limitation was on the distribution of the EDS and RDS scores since both had a non-normal distribution skewed to the right. This issue was caused by the fact that the majority of people reported only a few instances of discrimination which made the data highly concentrated. Additionally, the EDS scores' distribution failed also the Levene's test for homogeneity of variances. This

situation caused to use of non-parametric tests like Mann-Whitney U, Kruskal-Wallis H and Spearman's Rho coefficient in the analysis, which compare the median ranks between groups rather than the means. Furthermore, the ANCOVA (Analysis of Covariance) test was still conducted even if the EDS scores' distribution violated the assumption of also the homogeneity of variances, making the results of this analysis to be considered with caution.

While these limitations highlight the challenges faced during this research, they also provide important indications for future studies. Given the available resources and conditions, the approach used was the best possible. However, addressing issues such as non-representative sampling, over or underrepresented groups and violations of statistical assumptions will be crucial in enhancing the robustness and generalizability of future findings. By implementing more precise research designs and refining measurement tools, subsequent studies can further our understanding the perception of discrimination in Padua, maybe also within other contexts such as discrimination at work or discrimination inside the community, and its multifaceted impacts.

Lastly, this study focused on "perceptions" of discrimination rather than the actual "occurrence" of discrimination. To avoid any side effects that might have been caused by the study of "perceived" discrimination, an observational research method might be implemented in future research.

Conclusions

Abrahamic religions are a peculiar group of religions that share a great amount of the same Biblical narratives and figures combined with different interpretations and traditions. Despite being grounded on the same narrative of the creation of the world and important biblical figures such as Abraham and Moses for all three Abrahamic religions and Jesus Christ for Christianity and Islam, they have been developed differently to create different groups of people who ended up worshipping the same omnipotent and unique figure of God but often considering adherents of other Abrahamic religions as idolaters, heretical and off-shoot. While this often hostile approach was not present in other polytheistic religions such as Greek and Roman religions, Abrahamic religions tend to consider each other as a threat, as proved historically. Each of them considers their narratives and their way of worshipping God the correct one and, especially in the case of Christianity and Islam, believes that the only salvation is through their system of belief. This strong belief in their religion being the "righteous one" creates the ground for their hostile approach towards each other, which is the basis of their proselytic approach, except for Judaism, ideally trying to bring all individuals around the world to salvation.

Despite many secularization theorists that are expecting religion, or for some at least the religious attendance, to vanish slowly from societies all around the world, numerous research showed that religions are still an important aspect of human life, culture and identity. Even in increasingly secular societies, many people still find meaning, comfort and a sense of belonging through their religious practices. Judaism, Christianity and Islam experienced and continue to experience different kinds of modernization and secularization processes. These processes aim to align the religion and its traditional values with the values that emerged with the secularization and modernization of the globe. In doing so, some groups fail to embrace these new values (as in the case of Orthodox Judaism and Fundamentalist Islam), some show an unsteady approach towards these novelties (such as the Roman Catholic Church and Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople) and some become highly integrated with them (as happened with Reformist Judaism and most of the Protestant Churches around the world).

Considering religions only an element of the private sphere would be erroneous. Religious rhetoric and symbols are widely used by politicians to gain political power and as a tool useful in controlling the masses. This intertwining of religion and politics highlights how religious narratives can shape politics. Additionally, some religious groups and movements are protagonists of one of the most debated topics of the last decades, religious terrorism. Therefore, understanding religion's role in society requires a nuanced examination of its multifaceted interactions with political power and social structures.

Religions, especially the Abrahamic religions as discussed throughout this research, create a ground where there is a duality constituted by "us", adherents of the righteous religion worshipping the unique and correct God in the right manner and "them", groups of people illusioned by the false Messiahs and prophecies, worshipping their God in incorrect ways according to "our" beliefs. As individuals observe and understand the world by dividing both objects and other individuals into categories, this duality creates a categorization of a favorited ingroup, composed of individuals who share the same religious beliefs and an outgroup, where all the believers of other faiths are included. However, as discussed previously, some religions tend to accept with more ease some other religions, such as Islam towards "peoples of the book" (namely Christians and Jews) or Judaism towards religions respecting the seven laws of Noah. Still, even in historical cases when a sovereign state tolerated adherents of different religious groups, as in the case of the Ottoman Empire, different treatments and favouritisms occurred. Religious discrimination, which indicates the case when a group of people are treated differently due to their religious beliefs, constituted the focus of this research. While focusing on religious discrimination, other forms of discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, race, language, political and non-political opinions and social or personal conditions are also examined in the theoretical part of the research and some of these types of discrimination were analyzed also within the field research among the students of the University of Padua.

This research, being the first research focusing on religious discrimination among university students in Italy, provided important results in a previously unexplored area. It aimed to measure to what extent and in which forms the students

living in Padua and the province of Padua perceived discrimination in both general and religious forms. The quantitative approach used in the research helped to measure and compare the perceptions of general and religious discrimination of the students with different characteristics. Moreover, the deductive approach helped to link the sociological and psychological theories regarding discrimination to the evidence obtained from the survey.

The field research had fourteen hypotheses regarding both general and religious discrimination. Only in five hypotheses, the null hypotheses were rejected to confirm the alternative hypotheses. A statistically significant difference in perceptions of general discrimination between Italian citizens and non-Italian citizens and between female and male students was found. Students without Italian citizenship and female students perceived significantly higher levels of general discrimination compared to their Italian and male counterparts, respectively. Another hypothesis where a statistically significant difference was found was between students self-declaring to be from the "Middle East/North Africa" ethnical group created for this research and between students from the "White/European" ethnical group. Students from the "Middle East/North Africa" perceived significantly higher levels of general discrimination compared to the "White/European" students. Additionally, the hypothesis stating that the perceptions of discrimination will change across different levels of study had an ulterior analysis where instead of the variable regarding the level of study, a closely related variable, age, was used. It was demonstrated that the students between 18-21 years old had significantly lower levels of general discrimination compared to students between 26-29 years old, which as addressed in the third chapter, was probably caused by the age distribution of the students without Italian citizenship and of those adhering to the "Middle East/North Africa" ethnic group, which were found to perceive aggravated general discrimination as suggested by the previous hypotheses. Regarding religious discrimination, statistically significant higher levels of religious discrimination were found to be reported by Muslim students compared to students professing other beliefs and by students who wear religious dress or accessories compared to those who do not wear such items despite professing a religion.

As observed, only five hypotheses and the additional analysis regarding age confirmed the existence of a statistically significant difference in the perception of discrimination among students. It is crucial to note that, the majority of the analyses where some groups were confirmed to perceive significantly more discrimination than others referred to the perception of general discrimination. The sample that was used for this quantitative field research demonstrated that religious discrimination among the students of the University of Padua is likely to be found in its specific form of Islamophobia, supported by the analysis regarding the perceptions of religious discrimination of Muslim students, and towards students wearing religious dress or accessories. Additionally, other types of discrimination such as gender, ethnicity and age-based discrimination are confirmed to be perceived by the students.

Therefore, the findings of this research called for further analysis regarding perceptions of Islamophobia among the students of the University of Padova while urging a greater interest in studies focusing on gender and ethnicity-based discrimination. Despite the limitations in the research regarding the representativeness of the sample and the presence of over and underrepresented groups, the findings of the research provided insightful guidelines for further research regarding discrimination and important evidence regarding the frequency of reoccurrence of discriminatory acts towards students in the city.

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